Issue 83 – Thursday 23 June 2005

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JAK landmark

Alan & Kath Bonson's first new coach

Royal Ascot rip-off
Cost at York adds insult to injury

Truronian faces inquiry
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One man's view of China
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routeONE issue 83 23 June 2005

Cover story

JAK landmark

Kath Bonson's first new coach

KEIGHLEY-BASED J.A.K. Travel has bought its first new coach, a Panther-bodied Volvo B12B from Plaxton Coach Sales. Delivered at the start of May, it has already been used on several tours including one to the French Alps.

Full story on page 6

Spark your imagination

NEVER let it be said that journalists employed by routeONE don't use either public transport in general, or coaches and buses in particular.

It's a matter of choice that we take the bus into town, or experience coach travel whenever convenient. In the process we are able to sample the good and the bad, the new and the old, the frequent and infrequent, the cutting-edge and the nostalgic.

Such experiences add a flavour to our reports that would otherwise be missing. It is, after all, on-the-road delivery that really matters, and everyone recognises that reliability is always one of the key factors that passengers are expecting. Breakdowns are, therefore, most unwelcome. Although, it has to be said, it is a testimony to the industry's thorough maintenance regimes that they are remarkably infrequent given the total mileage covered every day by the nation's PSV fleet. Nevertheless, waiting passengers can be left with a feeling of isolation and desperation when their coach or bus doesn't turn up following a failure somewhere in the system. It's particularly bad when there's no explanation, but being journalists we always go in search of an answer.

In recent weeks we have been let down in two unrelated incidents. To our surprise there was a common factor - the failure of on-board electronics.

The role of computers is covered in this week's special routeONE feature (see pages 27-32) where we explore the latest developments that are making such an important contribution to the smooth and efficient administration of coach and bus operations.

However, computerised systems have also taken hold on the vehicles themselves, controlling numerous functions from gearbox to destination gear, while safety is also enhanced through the adoption of features designed to improve the driver's ability to control the vehicle. Is it significant that it's the electronics that accounted for our two failures?

Or, is it just an unrepresentative sample?

Such questions spark-off a debate about the relative virtues of new versus old, multiplex versus hard wiring, Euro 4 versus Euro 2, and automatic versus manual. Time then to find some of the answers by launching the routeONE Maintenance Diary.

Our plan is to track the maintenance experience of a dozen vehicles over the next 12 months. Therefore, we are looking for volunteers who are prepared to submit a monthly report on an easy-to-complete form supplied by routeONE. We want a good selection of vehicles – six coaches and six buses, including a mix of mini, midi, and full-size that represents a cross-section of the current PSV parc.

The Maintenance Diary will cover those aspects that directly affect the reliability and cost of running each particular type of vehicle – fuel, repairs, insurance, etc. The vehicle and the operator will be profiled in routeONE and this will be followed by a month-by-month diary of events.

The aim is to enable operators to make comparisons based on real-life experience.

Are you up for it?

Mike Morgan
Editor

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CIRCULATION
To comply with the requirements of the *Audit Bureau of Circulations*, we must have individual signed requests to add names to the circulation list.

Average weekly circulation January-December 2004, 6,366 copies per issue as independently audited by ABC.

Qualifying readers get their copy free every Thursday. To receive a copy call 0870 241 8745.

All readers will be asked to fill in a form once every three years to ensure that routeONE is still giving the industry what it wants out of a weekly news-led magazine.

We will normally only send one copy to each company operating centre. Additional copies available, £99 per year.

COVER: Plaxton

cpt ABC

Buses centr

Granting planning permission on the basis of incorporating public transport is not new, but Fastrack in Kent takes the concept much further, as Andy Izatt reports

THE NEW Fastrack bus-based transit system is a key element of the massive Kent Thameside project that is designed to regenerate the area between Dartford and Gravesend.

Kent Thameside Delivery Board Fastrack Project Manager David George told routeONE that Fastrack should be seen primarily as a regeneration tool with the aim of facilitating new developments and influencing travel behaviour from the outset. Removing the need for cars to be used for local trips is critical to the successful growth of Kent Thameside.

In 1995 Dartford Borough Council, Kent County Council and Gravesham Borough Council formed the Kent Thameside Association to present a vision of how land between Dartford and Gravesend could be regenerated. The area was dominated by disused chalk pits left by cement company Blue Circle, which still owned the land. Regional planning guidance under RPG9A came from the Government as part of the wider Thames Gateway regeneration initiative extending both sides of the River Thames. Kent Thameside aimed to create 30,000 new homes and 50,000 jobs, and central to the proposal was a new tramline called Fastrack.

In the late 1990s £0.5 million was spent on a detailed study looking at planning and land use for the area and how the original Kent Thameside vision could be realised. From the start Fastrack was seen as a critical component connecting the proposed developments with Dartford and Gravesend as well as railway stations including a new facility at Ebbsfleet on the Channel Tunnel Rail Link. Journey times to central London will be cut to just 15 minutes when this opens in 2007. "It will enable fast commuting into London, but also inward commuting into Kent Thameside," explained David George.

The study concluded that a tram would not be appropriate because of high cost, unsuitable topography and long development period that would be required. However, a high quality bus-based transit system was seen as being able to deliver the essential elements of a tram system. "Fastrack has to deal with day to day trips in the area," explained Mr George. "We are looking to minimise at source the need to travel outsource and, through segregation and priority measures, provide a credible alternative to the car for local trips."

Although the major site developers in Kent Thameside will pay for most of Fastrack, there was recognition that the initial core east-west route B would need 'kick start' public funding. Kent County Council committed £15 million through its Local Transport Plan and work started in September 2004. Completion is due in February/March 2006, although work may well be complete by the end of this year with buses running by Christmas.

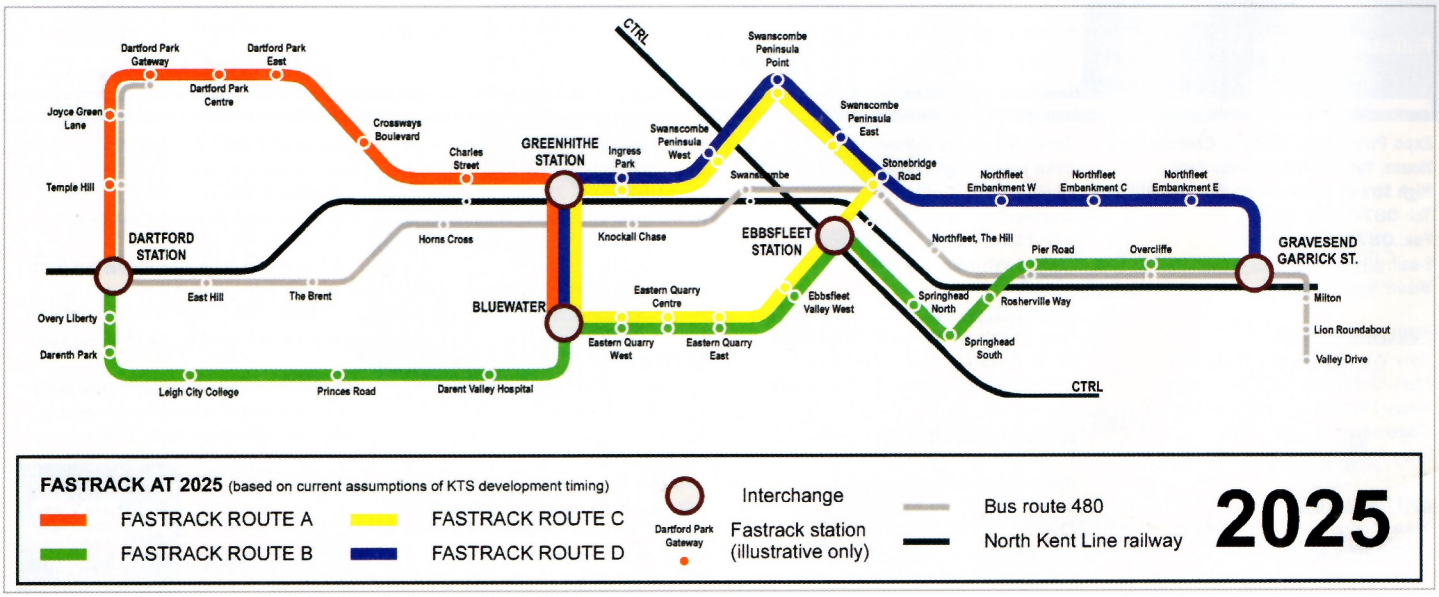
Fastrack route B will run from Dartford railway station via Darent Valley Hospital, Bluewater, Geenhithe station, Swanscombe, Stonebridge Road, Ebbsfleet station and Springhead South to Gravesend with the £15 million scheme focussed between Dartford and Bluewater. Over this length 50% will comprise purpose-built busways with a further 25% utilising dedicated road space. Buses will have priority at traffic lights and real time information will be supplied at Fastrack stops through Kent County Council's established BusNet GPS location system.

Arriva is set to run first two Fastrack routes

As the huge Eastern Quarry site east of Bluewater is developed over the next 10 years with 7,500 new homes, route B will be re-routed with new priorities through the development between the shopping complex and Ebbsfleet station.

Kent County Council has ordered 14 Wrightbus Eclipse Urban Volvo B7RLEs for the service and the £2.2 million cost is being met through a Sustainable Communities Fund grant from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, which is backing the Thames Gateway project. The buses will be finished in a striking Fastrack livery.

David George told



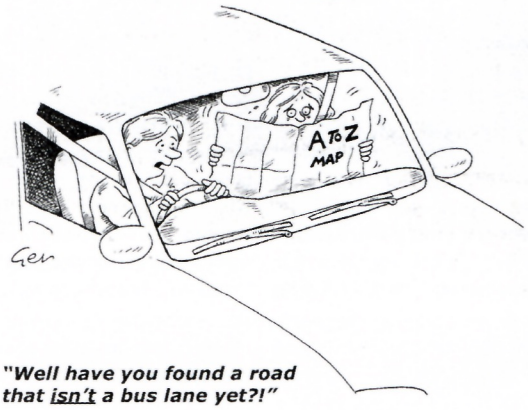
e stage

routeONE that an ideal vehicle would have been a 12-mete version of the recently-launched Wrightbus StreetCar. "But it's only available as an artic and our high frequency services simply do not require vehicles with that capacity at this stage of the project," he explained.

While route B is forward thinking, the proposed route A is based on a more radical proposition. Development of Dartford Park north of Dartford was constrained by the number of car movements through the already busy Junction 1A on the M25 orbital motorway.

However, developer ProLogis and Dartford Borough Council have managed to obtain provisional planning permission for a larger scheme than would otherwise have been possible by committing to providing a sustainable, viable public transport alternative as part of the Fastrack network. Dartford Park is now expected to deliver 500 new homes, 7,500 new jobs and some 111,000 sq metres of business space in a new Science Park.

Fastrack route A will run from Dartford Station to Greenhithe station and Bluewater through the development and Dartford Park residents will have free travel on this service. Again dedicated road space and priorities will be built and the route, using a high quality fleet of buses paid for by the developer, is expected to become operational in around 18 months time.



"Well have you found a road that isn't a bus lane yet?!"

Arriva is the dominant operator in the area and Kent County Council is the local transport authority. They have been working together under current *de minimis* rules to see how Fastrack can best be delivered and integrated into the established local bus network.

Arriva is to run both initial Fastrack routes. Southern Counties Commercial Director Kevin Hawkins told routeONE that the operator had been involved for some years. Although A & B are separate contracts, the objective is to make the vehicles as similar as possible.

Buses for B have been sourced through commercial procurement tendering and reflect much of the thinking that was exhibited in the Arriva 'Bus of the Future' Wrightbus B7L three years ago, including two by one seating in the front section of the vehicle. They will also have information displays and on-board satellite navigation. Route A will run under contract to the developer and Arriva is procuring the same type of bus that has been bought by Kent County Council for route B. PVR on route A will be 10.

"Fastrack B will start late this year or early next year," explained Mr Hawkins. "Whilst the Dartford Park Fastrack A is all tied into when the first houses are completed, currently predicted for late next year."

Four routes are ultimately planned for Fastrack. Implementation of later routes is at least seven years away, but Kent County Council is then hoping to offer the complete network as one concession. Quality contracts could then be a feature of a system that is expected to carry around two thirds of the number of passengers currently transported by the Docklands Light Railway.

"It has to be a very efficient and attractive service," said Mr George. "The Kent Thameside development will fall down if we don't get it right."

routeONE Comment

Public transport provision is not just a component of the regeneration of the Kent Thameside area.

Planning permission for Dartford Park was conditional on the project being able to provide an affective alternative to car use.

Time will tell as to whether Fastrack achieves its aims in Kent, but interested parties across the country will be monitoring its progress carefully.

It's a critically important project for the coach and bus industry, and if it delivers, could fundamentally change the perception of public transport and the role of the bus in particular.

top stories

New coach is landmark for JAK

KEIGHLEY-BASED JAK Travel has bought its first new coach, a Panther-bodied Volvo B12B from Plaxton Coach Sales. Delivered at the start of May, it has already been used on several tours including one to the French Alps.....PAGE 6

Brecon: the new name in conversions

A NEW minibus converter is opening for business in Brecon, Wales. Although the firm formally launches in September, it's holding an open day on 29 June. Anyone interested in attending should contact John Wiggins on 07713 64444 for an invitation.....PAGE 7

MK Metro turns to Scania

MK METRO, the 97-vehicle Milton Keynes operator owned and managed by Julian Peddle, is making a major investment in six new Wrightbus Solar Scania L94UBs and has an option to buy four more, representing replacement of just over 10% of the fleet with full-size vehicles.....PAGE 8

Abbey and Smiths close after expansion problems

ABBEY Coaches and Smiths Travel (High Wycombe) Ltd has ceased trading. The combined fleet operated 27 vehicles on school contracts, local services and private hire.....PAGE 10

Three-way bus war on the Black Isle

A THREE-WAY bus war has broken out on the Black Isle, north of Inverness, between Stagecoach subsidiary Schoolbus Ltd - which is running five minutes ahead of new operator Scotbus - and Rapsons.....PAGE 12

Warwickshire votes for belted school buses

WARWICKSHIRE County Council has voted for the phased introduction of seatbelts on school buses, but it is expected to cost almost £1 million per year.....PAGE 14

Solent helps sea festival

SOLENT Blue Line (SBL) has been contracted to provide park-and-ride and many staff movements for the International Festival of the Seas in Portsmouth next week.

For crowds attending the re-enactment of the Battle of Trafalgar on Tuesday, 37 extra vehicles are required. Ten Darts SLFs and six Optare and Plaxton-bodied DAF DB250s, originally built for Capital Logistics's Transport for London route 60 contract, are being hired from Dawsonrentals.

The single deckers will allow 12 Olympians to be released from the main fleet although vehicles are also expected to be hired from Stagecoach Devon, Stagecoach South, Wilts & Dorset, Southern Vectis and London-based Wiltax.

Nat Ex to win G8 tender?

NATIONAL Express is the preferred bidder to provide coach transport at the 6-8 July G8 Summit, being held at the Gleneagles Hotel.

In addition to diplomats' entourages, transport is being provided for the media and suppliers.

The work includes shuttle services from Edinburgh and Glasgow to the Gleneagles Equestrian Centre.

First puts up UK bus fares

FIRST is putting up fares at most of its UK operating companies from this weekend.

A good hedging deal on fuel in the last financial year has now expired, exposing the company to higher prices, which together with labour and insurance costs rising faster than inflation have put the businesses under pressure.

However, at many companies, daily, weekly and monthly tickets remain unchanged, with standard tickets bearing the brunt of the rises.

First new coach for JAK

Andy Izatt

KEIGHLEY-BASED JAK Travel has bought its first new coach, a Panther-bodied Volvo B12B from Plaxton Coach Sales. It has already been used on several tours including one to the French Alps.

Alan and Kath Bonson founded JAK Travel in 1987. The firm runs four Plaxton-bodied Volvos, the oldest being only N-registered. Two, including the new arrival, are configured as 49 seat executives while the others are 53 seaters. As well as private hire, the firm covers more than 60 tours a year either privately organised or from its own programme. It also operates around 70 day trips and specialises in exploring niche markets that appeal to a younger clientele than might not normally be associated with coach travel. Examples are a four-day itinerary that encompassed visiting six ornamental gardens and island-hopping in Scotland involving ten ferry crossings.

"We had to find niches that were slightly different," Kath Bonson told routeONE. "We need to have a spread of product. Not all our eggs in one basket." Apart from a Yellow Pages advertisement, JAK generates business from word of mouth recommendation and its own database.

The Bonsons bought their first Panther-bodied Volvo last year. The decision to buy new was the "logical next step for us" after steadily building the business up over 18 years, explained Kath. Passenger reaction has been positive to the new coach and drivers like the I-Shift gearbox. It features 49 blue moquette trimmed Esteban reclining seats with three-point belts, continental door and centre demountable toilet. There is also air conditioning, tinted double glazing, curtains, individual reading lights and radio/DVD/CD PA system. A video player has been added by Autosound while high visibility red grab rails are used in the entrance area.

"I was impressed when I visited Scarborough before placing the order," said Alan Bonson. "The new company is going in the right direction, putting more thought into the build and listening more to what its customers want. We wanted to consider the environment too and had a Webasto heater installed, providing a warm interior to welcome passengers when parked without the engine running. Externally, the split screen we chose reduces the potential cost of replacement and looks well with the gull-wing mirrors."

However Kath Bonson has strong views on current moquettes.

JAK opted for a plain dark blue because she feels that the choice available doesn't reflect modern design trends. "Would you have these in your own home or car?" she asked.

Volvo Panther: the decision to buy new was the "logical next step for us"

OFT agrees on Black Prince take over

FOLLOWING the Office of Fair Trading's (OFT) decision to allow First to take over Leeds-based Black Prince, its services will be incorporated into First's network from 31 July.

Explaining its decsion, which has taken almost six months to reach (routeONE, News, 2 June), the OFT said that no other operator expressed a serious interest in acquiring the business, which would have otherwise closed.

First is to take over 17 vehicles, (16 Scania double deckers and a Scania single decker), along with the routes, 75 staff and goodwill, but not the depot, which is being developed into housing.

The vehicles will have First stickers applied, but will be repainted gradually. This policy is in contrast to Stagecoach, which when it took over the Dennis operation in Manchester (routeONE, News, 7 April), ensured that only Stagecoach liveried vehicles were used from the first day.

Sutton Trust school bus plan wins backing

COUNCILS and PTEs have broadly supported a report by educational charity the Sutton Trust to extend yellow school bus schemes to all primary school children.

The comprehensive 40-page report says that the cost, for pupils who live more than a mile from a school, would be an extra £184 million annually, but prevent 40 deaths and 900 serious injuries a year.

The cost of home-to-school transport in England was £662m in 2002-2003, although this includes special needs transport for 70,000 children.

Metro Chairman Cllr Stanley King told routeONE: "Metro's scheme, the only countywide scheme in the UK, is proving the points raised in the report on a daily basis. We wholeheartedly support their bid to allow other regions in the UK to enjoy the same benefits as those we now have in West Yorkshire."

The full report can be found at www.suttontrust.com

Brecon: the new name in conversions

New factory for Brecon Coachworks

A NEW minibus converter is opening for business in Brecon, Wales. Although the firm formally launches in September, it's holding an open day on 29 June.

Anyone interested in attending should contact John Wiggins on 07713 64444 for an invitation.

Brecon Coachworks Ltd which draws on the 25 years expertise of a respected south of England converter, is based at Enterprise House, Enterprise Park, Brecon (Tel: 01874 620013, Fax: 01874 620079). Peter Andow is Managing Director, Tony Baugh Sales Engineer and the company already has 10 employees.

The firm plans to offer "a complete service for the planning, design and personalisation of vehicles." Vehicles from all the major manufacturers including BMC, Citroen, Fiat, Ford, Iveco, Mercedes-Benz, Peugeot, Vauxhall and Volkswagen can be converted into wheelchair accessible vehicles including ambulances and PTS vehicles, taxis, private hire minibuses or coaches.

Work is already underway with the Welsh Development Agency to develop a yellow 16-seat school minibus. It will have M1 tested specifications including a strengthened floor, seatbelts and mountings. Testing is being undertaken at Manchester University's STATUS (Specialist Transport Advice & Testing Society) department.

Brecon Coachworks will be a distributor in Wales of Autoholdings' BMC, Autosan and King Long products. On display on the 29 June from 1000hrs to 1600hrs will be the King Long KL6127, Autosan Eagle, BMC School Bus, BMC Probus and BMC Megastar. Visitors will also have the opportunity to see the new factory.

Ladyman launches new buses in Thanet

IN HIS FIRST official bus-related function as Minister of State For Transport and local MP, Dr Stephen Ladyman, launched nine new Optare Solos at the Westwood Cross Shopping Centre, Thanet, on Monday (20 June).

Stagecoach's new 'Thanet Stars' service builds on the success of the Thanet Loop service, launched last October. It has invested £750,000 in the Solos that replace existing vehicles on services in Margate and Ramsgate, providing new links to Westwood Cross.

Stagecoach's East Kent Managing Director Paul Southgate told routeONE: "The proof of the success of the Thanet Loop is the increasing ridership. We've worked with our partners in the Thanet Quality Bus Partnership to improve buses and this new investment is the next stage of putting an excellent public transport network in place and shows the confidence that we have in the area."

At the launch are (l-r): Thanet District Council Chairman Jeff Kirkpatrick, Chairman's Lady Mandy Winters, Stephen Ladyman, Paul Southgate, Kent County Councillor Alan Poole and Chairman of Strategic Planning KCC Paulina Stockell

Children go free in London

IN KEEPING with his re-election promise, London Mayor Ken Livingstone has announced free bus and tram travel for under-16 year olds (and under-18s in full-time education) living in London from 1 September.

The measure will cost an extra £70 million a year, of which £50m represents the revenue, and £20m for providing extra bus services.

Currently, under-11s travel free on London's buses and trams. However, those over 14 years old will need an Oyster photocard to travel for free.

Although child fares will be abolished, visitors to the capital will still have to pay for child travel, incorporated in Travelcards.

First makes more changes

FOLLOWING last week's announcement that Nicola Shaw has been appointed Managing Director UK Bus, (routeONE, **News, 16 June) Operations Director UK Bus David Kaye has been appointed Deputy Managing Director**.

However, he retains his previous position along with line management responsibilities for the operating companies.

In a further change, increased support for certain operating companies has seen two UK Bus Board Directors given additional duties.

Commercial Director Leon Daniels is focussing on First's bus operations in Bristol, Wales, Devon & Cornwall, Somerset & Avon, First Student UK and Dublin-based Aircoach. UK Bus Engineering Director David Liston is focussing on the smaller companies in Aberdeen, Eastern Counties, Essex, the Midlands and East Scotland.

Short notice registration variations warning given

THE NORTH Western Traffic Commissioner Beverley Bell has made it plain that in future requests for short notice variations to local bus service registrations will not be automatically granted.

Her comments came when she granted an application for a fresh licence by Wigan Buses Ltd, a company formed by William Trezise following the revocation of the licence he held in the name of Springfield Coaches.

The company, of 24 Douglas Bank Drive, Springfield, Wigan, was seeking a new licence for four vehicles, having initially applied for 15 vehicles.

After Lancashire County Council Area Bus Services Manager David Chapman, said that the registration of a schools service operated under contract by Springfield Coaches had been cancelled without the requisite notice and that in such circumstances a short notice application would be made, the Commissioner said that in future she was going to look at all short notice applications herself as she felt that the provisions were being abused by PTEs and local authorities and such applications would not just be granted as a matter of course.

A full report of the hearing will be in a forthcoming issue of routeONE.

Carlisle ready for re-launch

STAGECOACH is to re-launch its Carlisle network at the end of June with group Chief Executive Brian Souter and local dignitaries.

To be re-branded Carlisle Citi, similar to networks in Peterborough and Cambridge, all 12 city services will be low-floor and operated by 39 new ADL Pointer Darts in a £3.9 million investment.

Although the routes remain unchanged, new maps, branding and cove panels have been designed by Ray Stenning's Best Impressions and the marketing plan includes a leaflet drop to city homes, together with fare offers and competitions. Bus-back branding uses the slogan "taking the 'car' out of Carlisle."

The new Darts were ordered to replace the vehicles lost in January's floods, when 87 vehicles were destroyed.

The rest of the depot's allocation of 70 vehicles is step-entrance vehicles, which work on non-city services.

Free Connect 1 service axed

WHAT IS thought to have been the only bus service in the UK to have run free of charge as part of a commercial network, Trent Barton's Giltbrook Farm Connect 1, runs for the last time on 23 July.

Started six years ago as a shuttle for the estate, it linked with Rainbow 1 buses to avoid them having to make diversions.

At the time Rainbow 1 was delivering growth but competition from the Nottingham tram and a slow-down in people's spending has reversed this. Some of the 10-minute interval route is being replaced by a half-hourly Notts and Derby service.

MK Metro turns to Scania

Andy Izatt

MK METRO, the 97-vehicle Milton Keynes operator owned and managed by Julian Peddle, is making a major investment in six new Wrightbus Solar Scania L94UBs and has an option to buy four more, representing replacement of just over 10% of the fleet with full size vehicles.

Mr Peddle told routeONE that he felt that the Scania package, including whole life costing, had closed the price gap between heavyweight 12-metre saloons and midibus alternatives.

Passenger numbers on MK Metro's network are 11% up on this time last year. The firm already operates an S-registered Wright-bodied L94UB a former demonstrator, but has traditionally used Mercedes-Benz minibuses on its high frequency routes. In recent years a fleet of 25 Optare Solos has been acquired, although more than 30 step-entrance and low-floor Dennis Darts are also operated.

The first two Solars, which seat 43, are due in October with further pairs expected in March and October next year. If the option is taken up for a further four, MK Metro will be able to convert its main service 5 between Wolverton/Stony Stratford-Milton Keynes city centre-Bletchley Lakes Estate. The route has a PVR of 12 and three SB120s, including two bought new last year, would make up the allocation. Currently Dart SLFs are being used. Route branding has been introduced as well as on trunk services 4 and 8.

MK Metro already has experience of the Scania L94

Despite the realisation of investments in Choice Travel and part of Tellings-Golden Miller, Mr Peddle told routeONE he is still committed to exploring on-going and new business opportunities within the industry.

He firmly believes that Scania is taking the right path by pursuing EGR at Euro 4. What concerns Mr Peddle is the availability of urea to small operators who may not have comprehensive onsite facilities, particularly in more remote locations where the additive may not be available at commercial filling stations.

He also has concerns about drivers accidentally filling the wrong tank.

"It could be a two-year wonder," observed Mr Peddle who speculates if other engine manufacturers are secretly pursuing the same engine technology as Scania.

Another operator goes into coach dealing

THE TREND for operators to turn their hand to dealing in coach sales continues, with the purchase of Bob Vale Coach Sales (including the premises) for an undisclosed seven-figure sum by the Tedd family, which runs Andover-based Amport & District Coaches. The business had been for sale for some time.

It follows the retirement of Bob Vale, 69, but otherwise it's business as usual at the existing High Wycombe site, with all the staff retained. However, from August, the operation will have a new sales centre at Amport's 14-acre Thruxton site, following the closure of Plaxton's southern coach sales operation at the site by the end of July.

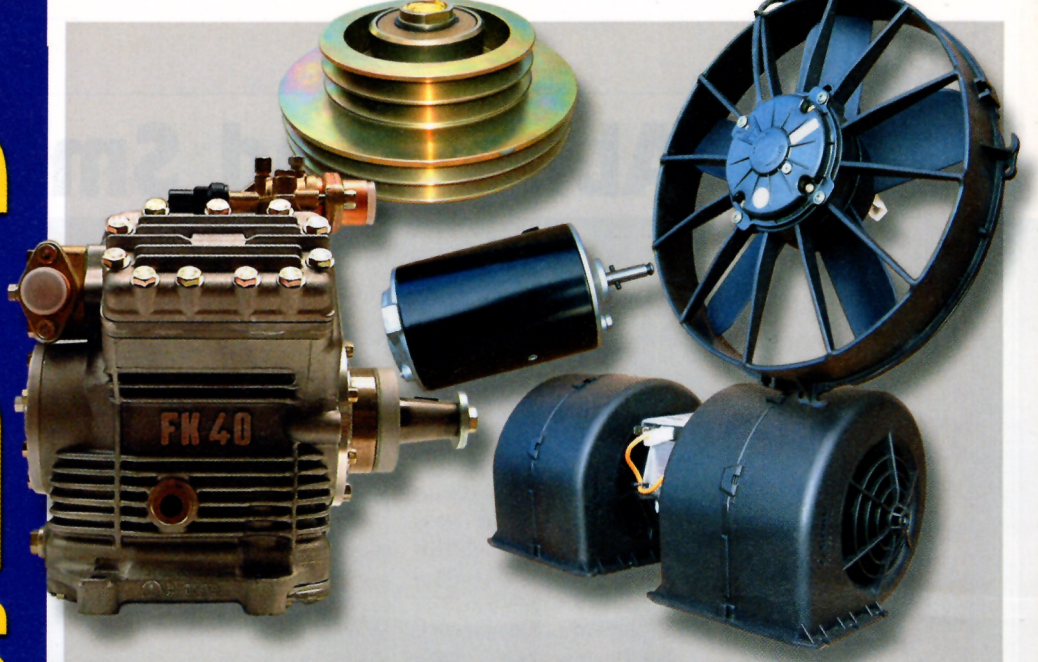
Phil Tedd told routeONE that the enlarged business expects to increase the number of vehicles for sale by around 40%. In addition to the 50 normally held at High Wycombe, there will be 20-25 at Thruxton, although sales will be negotiated by the existing Bob Vale sales team comprising General Manager Mick O'Connor, supported by Sales Executive Maurice Bateman. Vehicles will be prepared and demonstrated by existing Amport's staff.

Phil Tedd also expects to increase vehicle sales, currently 180-190 a year, to around 260 per year. "We're in a good location here near to the A303" he said, "and there isn't anyone else in the area. Operators coming from the south west have traditionally called at Thruxton, before going to High Wycombe."

Planning restrictions prevent Saturday opening at High Wycombe, but Saturday trading will take place at Thruxton. "Our overheads are low," added Phil Tedd "and we're not taking on any more staff, but it's up to all of us to make it work."

Bob Vale, who started the dealership in 1990, plans to spend much of his retirement in Cyprus.

air con PARTS



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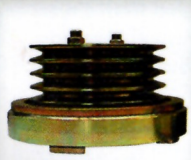
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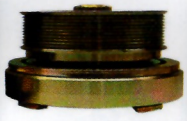
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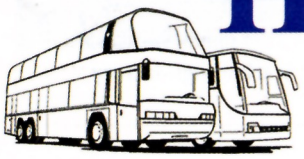

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The Genuine Alternative

Volvo closes Drogmuller

Volvo Buses is closing the former Drogmuller factory in Heilbronn, Germany which it bought in 1994. Since 2001, the factory has been building the low volume 9900 coach, but financial results have been unsatisfactory for many years, says the company. Around 150 people will lose their jobs.

Volvo says the decision is inline with its "long-term strategy for achieving profitability and continuing to upgrade the global coach range and concentrate manufacturing at the main factories."

Crack down on bus crime

A week-long operation to crack down on crime on the West Midlands bus network began on 13 June. Operation Trojan 5 saw the first outing for the Operation Safer Travel's Police Teams 18 new police community support officers (PCSOs) patrolling main bus routes, accompanied by a drugs dog and ticket inspectors.

Bike-bus promotion

This Saturday (25 June) 15,000 cyclists will descend on York racecourse for the York Cycle Show and Rally. The National Cyclists' Organisation will have a stand promoting bike-bus services and any operators who want to have their leaflets distributed should contact Dave Holladay at tramsol@aol.com without delay.

Sale of Vectis wins approval

Southern Vectis shareholders have decided to accept Go-Ahead's offer to buy their shares paving the way for its takeover, expected to be completed on 18 July (routeONE, News, 2 June).

Abbey and Smiths close after expansion problems

Andy Izatt

ABBEY Coaches and Smiths Travel (High Wycombe) Ltd have ceased trading following problems arising out of recent expansion. The combined fleet operated 27 vehicles on school contracts, local services and private hire.

Martyn Pearce who traded as Abbey Coaches with an O-licence for nine vehicles told routeONE he bought Smiths in September 2003. This was followed by the vehicles and contracts of Prestwood Travel a year later.

"This put a lot of strain on the business," Mr Pearce told routeONE about the Prestwood purchase. "Maintenance started to become an issue. Levels of quality dropped and I felt that we were not fulfilling our end of the bargain." Problems were compounded when notice was given for Abbey and Smiths to leave its Cressex premises at the end of July. "It all became too much," said Mr Pearce. "We handed back Smiths licence on 3 June. My O-Licence expires at the end of this month."

The combined business, which operated from Cryers Hill and Cressex, ran more than 10 Buckinghamshire County Council school contracts, a registered service, individual contracts to schools in Maidenhead and Great Missenden as well as private hire. Ten full time drivers, a number of part timers, four mechanics and two operations managers have been made redundant.

Picture: Paul Coley

Prestwood put too much strain on the business

Plaxton-bodied Volvo B10Ms formed the backbone of the fleet, although the Prestwood vehicles were more varied. These were largely replaced by Metrobus double deckers and National Greenways. "The majority of the vehicles were financed," said Mr Pearce. "Those that were not were used as equity."

He hopes to continue Abbey Coaches with a Leyland Tiger and has applied for a one vehicle O-licence.

School bus driver jailed for sexual assault

A SCHOOL bus driver, who sexually assaulted a 12 year old girl, a pupil on his bus, has been jailed for a year.

Judge Peter Lakin at Manchester Crown Court also ordered Alan Johnson, of Newton Heath, to sign the sex offenders register for seven years and banned him from working with children for life. He also ordered an inquiry by education authorities into how Johnson got a job involving the care of young children, in view of two previous convictions for indecent exposure.

The court heard that Johnson, who pleaded guilty to sexually assaulting a child under the age of 13, worked for Gorton-based Belle Vue Manchester Ltd for 12 years. The company said it would not have employed Johnson had it known his background, but admitted they only carried out Criminal Records Bureau checks on new employees. Some checks were carried out on Johnson when he applied for a PSV driving licence, but the convictions were not picked up.

The school that the child attended had acted to improve poor behaviour on the school bus by getting a permanent driver, who would build up a relationship with the pupils so he could identify and report unruly children.

On behalf of the school, Greater Manchester PTE gave the contract to Belle Vue. The company gave the job to Johnson, a father of three and experienced driver.

Bluebird and Trailer Tech combine

SCARBOROUGH-based Trailer Tech Services and Bluebird Accessible Vehicles have merged under the title Bluebird Vehicles.

Trailer Tech Services was established to service fleets of mobile scanning units.

Bluebird Vehicles Managing Director Rob Miller once headed the UK arm of Calumet Coach Inc, a leading supplier of these mobiles. Operations Director, Gary Robinson's background is in accessible vehicles, special build and conversions.

With a fully-equipped 50,000 sq ft plant, Bluebird Vehicles says it plans to become the "builder of choice" for a wide range of customers. It now offers two accessible buses, the Migro and Tucana, and is currently finishing Daily Start minibuses for Irisbus.

Business has 50,000 sq ft Scarborough factory

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Asia buses leave Britain

THE 100 buses and coaches donated to Asia Bus Response (ABR) were finally shipped from Southampton last Saturday, 18 June (routeONE, News, 16 June). They are due to arrive in Sri Lanka and Indonesia on 6 and 10 July.

The delay while import permits were gained has been vindicated, say ABR's organisers, following the news that Oxfam has had to pay 300% import duty totalling £500,000 on 25 four-wheel drive vehicles used to deliver relief.

Arriva and shops join up

SHOPPERS in Skelmersdale are being tempted onto Arriva buses with offers of free eye tests and digital cameras. It has joined forces with shops including Boots, Greggs, Specsavers and Bonmarché. As part of its launch of revised services it is sending leaflets to 30,000 homes with offers from the stores, discount ticket deals and bus information.

Stagecoach's good results

STAGECOACH was expected to announce a good set of annual results yesterday (Wednesday). It follows a pre-close trading statement by the company that it was "ahead of expectations" together with upbeat analysts' reports. Growth in its bus business, helped by its 'kick-start' initiatives was expected to be part of the driver for its good performance.

Entire fleet to be renewed?

ARRIVA is understood to be considering renewing the majority of its fleet in Runcorn and refurbishing the remainder as part of a 'big-bang' relaunch of the network, including increased frequencies. It is talking to Halton Borough Council about bus priority measures and says the council's support will be reflecting in Arriva's investment.

Bus war on the Black Isle

Andy Izatt

A THREE-WAY bus war has broken out on the Black Isle, north of Inverness, between Stagecoach subsidiary Schoolbus Ltd - which is running five minutes ahead of new operator Scotbus - and Rapsons.

Scotbus was established by former Rapsons Engineering Director Russell Henderson and Operations Director Neil MacDonald after they were made redundant at the end of November 2004. Both men had also previously worked for Stagecoach.

Mr MacDonald told routeONE the original intention was to concentrate on private hire, but the firm secured three Highland Council school contracts to the Black Isle after Rapsons withdrew from the work. Scotbus started the contracts from 12 April and took over a tendered service between North Kessock and Inverness on 9 May. From 16 May Scotbus started a commercial route between Rosemarkie and Inverness between Rapsons established service.

Scotbus (which has an O-licence for eight) operates five former Preston 86-seat Atlanteans, a 1991 Volvo Plaxton 51-seat coach and two Mercedes-Benz minibuses.

From 6 June Ayr-based Schoolbus has been running a pair of 'Magic Mini' branded Mercedes minis five minutes ahead of Scotbus on the Rosemarkie route and some journeys to North Kessock.

"Since Stagecoach started operating in front of us it has decimated our service," said Mr MacDonald. "We are not even covering our fuel costs now. We are a small company of two guys with eight vehicles. We are losing hundreds of pounds a week, whereas before we were covering our costs. Stagecoach has a turnover of £1.4 billion. We cannot afford to lose £100 a day, whereas they can afford to lose thousands."

Stagecoach North East Marketing Manager, Lisa Henry told routeONE: "We saw a niche in the market. It's irrelevant that another operator is already running on that route. We don't feel that it's a matter of competition. It's about getting people out of cars. Our Magic Minis offer lower fares and first indications are very promising."

Highland Council Transport Development Officer David Summers told routeONE: "Rapsons have run the service commercially for many years. The first morning journey and evening services are tendered. They also had a network of schools contracts that Scotbus successfully tendered for. Scotbus registered journeys from Cromarty to Inverness not directly in competition with Rapsons and with a couple of useful extensions in the city centre. Stagecoach has registered a directly competitive service. These are commercial services. It's competition."

Rapsons reorganises for 'possible sale'

SCOTTISH coach and bus operator Rapsons is reorganising its business into separate companies in a move that it says "could make it more marketable if it was sold in the future" although it says there are no sale proposals at the moment.

Its mainland and Skye operation is to become Highland Country Buses, under which some services are already branded, with the self-contained Orkney operation becoming Orkney Coaches Ltd.

It reverses a process that took place around five years ago when the businesses were brought together under the Rapsons name. O-licences in the new names are being applied for.

Meanwhile, non-PSV property, a mixture including land and housing, will stay with the Rapsons parent company.

The company is currently consulting staff about the changes and there are no plans to abandon the respected Rapsons brand, says the Inverness-based company which operates 250 buses and coaches, and employs more than 300 people.

In addition to its own services, Rapsons works on National Express and Scottish Citylink contracts

Wightlink sold to Aussie investment bank

AN AUSTRALIAN-BASED investment bank Macquarie with interests in Bristol and Birmingham airports, has beaten off competition from around the world to buy Isle of Wight ferry operator, Wightlink, for just over £230 million.

The purchase means Wightlink Chief Executive, Mike Aiken, stands to pocket more than £30 million. Mr Aiken, 62, owns over 45% of the equity, the majority of which is held by the management and staff. The rest is owned by Royal Bank of Scotland Private Equity.

Wightlink is the market leader across the Solent, operating eight ferries and four high-speed catamarans from the mainland to the Isle of Wight.

The profitable company is reported to have had about £18.5m earnings last year before interest, tax, depreciation and amortisation.

Ten years ago, Mr Aiken led a £108m management buy-out of Wightlink from Sea Containers, with private equity backing from Cinven and the Royal Bank.

In 2001, Cinven sold its holding in a secondary buyout, valuing Wightlink at £180m. Both Mr Aiken and finance director Adam Humphrey are stepping down after the Macquarie deal. Mr Humphrey will make about £9 million from the deal.

Macquarie outbid Pamplona Capital, a new private equity company backed by Russia's Alfa Group, and Nikko Principal Investments.

● Find out where to take coach groups on the Isle of Wight in routeONE ONTOUR, free to all coach operators in next week's issue.

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Ratcliff Tail Lifts sold

THE RATCLIFF Group Limited has sold its commercial and passenger tail lift business to Austrian-based Palfinger AG. Subject to the deal receiving regulatory approval, the new company will be known as Ratcliff Palfinger and will continue to be led by John Lane, Managing Director, together with the existing directors and management team. Sales, production and the 24/365 service network, are also unchanged.

National service company Stone Hardy, specialists in lifts for the disabled, Wessex Medical, and Planet Flowline are not affected by the sale and remain part of The Ratcliff Group based in Welwyn Garden City.

Arriva launch ups the ante

MERSEYSIDE'S biggest bus operator, Arriva, has increased the pressure on competitor GTL with the launch of a 15-minute interval service on route 19. It links Liverpool city centre with Lower Lane, near Fazakerley, over which the independent also runs.

Arriva has also extended its Liverpool fare zone to cover Maghull and Kirkby, with day tickets at £2.80 and a 90p student flat fare. Arriva's anti-competitive undertakings in the city expired last year with the end of its Merseyrail franchise.

TGM bus sale is completed

Tellings Golden Miller Group plc shareholders approved the sale of the company's bus division to National Express at an EGM last Friday (17 June). The £20.4 million purchase was completed by lunchtime the same day (routeONE, news, 2 June).

A special TGM dividend of 60p per share is being paid following the sale. Major shareholders, TGM Chairman Steve Telling and Julian Peddle, are expected to receive around £6.3m and £2.6m respectively.

Warwickshire votes for belted school buses

Andy Izatt

WARWICKSHIRE County Council has voted for the phased introduction of seatbelts on school buses, but it is expected to cost almost £1 million per year.

Primary children will be the first, followed by secondary pupils. The recommendation was made following a home-to-school transport review by the Learning Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

The Council says half the 9,450 entitled pupils under the age of 16, travel on seatbelted vehicles. Twenty double deckers are used, none of which have seatbelts. If routes operated by these vehicles were re-tendered, 30 single deckers would be required at an approximate cost of £525,000 per annum, says the report.

"A consequence of using only vehicles with seatbelts would be the removal of the majority of buses from the school transport network," says the report. "Companies including Stagecoach, Travel West Midlands and Arriva could be lost to the market as they do not currently operate belted vehicles. Belts could be retrofitted to some modern buses at a cost of re-tendering and retrofitting around £218,000 per annum."

With increased demand for coaches, the committee anticipates a "significant increase in existing coach prices when services are re-tendered at an approximate cost of £145,000 per annum. Disability Discrimination Act requirements prevent coaches being used on many local bus services. An increase in seatbelt availability would remove some opportunities for integration of public and school transport, promoted in the Transport Act 1985, and fully utilised in Warwickshire in recent years costing around £95,000 per annum.

Providing seatbelts will cost almost £1m per year

"The figures quoted in this report are based on a desktop exercise. The only way in which more accurate costings can be obtained is through a comprehensive tendering exercise. However, it is unlikely that the total annual cost of providing seatbelts on all vehicles will be less than £983,000 per annum."

First cuts back in north Dorset

FIRST Somerset and Avon is cutting back in northern Dorset because it says the services, some of which run into Somerset and Wiltshire, are no longer viable.

Axed from 25 July, they are a mix of commercial and tendered routes, including the 58 between Wincanton-Shaftesbury, 59 Shaftesbury-Gillingham, 68 Blandford-Yeovil, 69 Yeovil-Charlton Horethorne as well as two routes between Yeovil and Dorchester, the 212 via Maiden Newton, 216 through Sherbourne and Wednesday-only 202 Ilminster-Dorchester.

First says it told Dorset County Council of the cuts on 22 April. It says there will not be any staff cuts and vehicles will be redeployed onto other work.

Dorset's Principal Public Transport Co-ordinator Peter Impett told routeONE that discussions are ongoing with local companies to see if alternative provision could be arranged for 170,000 passenger journeys per year, requiring eight vehicles and 12-15 staff.

He added that only First, Go-Ahead and five local independents are currently providing public transport in the area.

Heritage Corner

Rolls-Royce hoisted high

A SLIGHTLY different theme for this week's Heritage Corner although still with a transport flavour.

One of the Queen's Rolls-Royces has been craned onboard The Royal Yacht *Britannia* in Edinburgh's port of Leith.

The Phantom V, worth £1 million was hoisted 150 feet over the top of the ship's masts and into the onboard garage. Bentley Motors Ltd has loaned the car to the ship's Trust for visitors to enjoy as a highlight of the five-star attraction.

When *Britannia* was built in 1953, a garage was considered essential. Latterly it housed the 1960 seven-seater Rolls-Royce Phantom V, or occasionally the Royal Land Rover. The car was built with removable bumpers to enable it to fit into the ship's garage, but it was still an arduous process getting it aboard.

This involved putting the car in a transporter, on to a barge, and then winching it aboard the Royal Yacht and sliding it into the garage sideways.

The car was revolutionary for its Perspex dome that covers the rear compartment, allowing a full view of the occupants and as a Royal car it has some unique features including a special trap-door in the roof for the Royal Standard.

In more recent years the garage was used by *Britannia's* Yachtsmen as a beer store, a darkroom and an entertainment room in the evenings. It was never locked.

All at sea with Queen's Rolls-Royce

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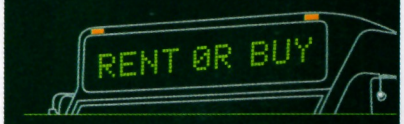

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Putting practicalities aside...

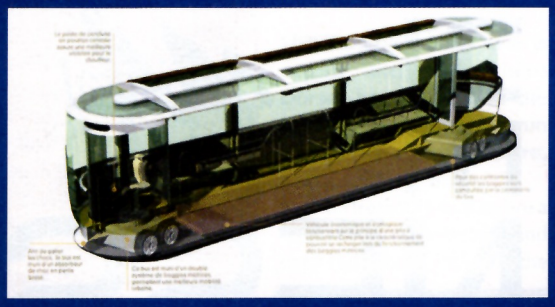
HEADING back from the UITP exhibition in Rome the other week The Whisperer was left wondering about the parallel universe that some seem to think that public transport exists in.

Aside from the fact that the show – which covers bus, rail and tram – didn't have a single vehicle on display on the stands much to the manufacturers' collective irritation (a problem with the floors he heard) there was a taste of the future. Or so we were told.

So what does this musical chairs arrangement in an otherwise bare room mean?

Well, it's a bus. A concept, no less!

It publicised the 're?bus' design competition – "Future bus concepts for European cities" and the winners, Eric Daru and Nicolas Groult from France received 5,000 euros (£3,141) for their efforts, pictured below.



The competition, supported by 11 organisations including Connex, Keolis and Transdev, started last year. At the UITP show, the 31 shortlisted designs from hundreds of entries by design students (including the UK), were in a brochure. The point was not to re-design existing buses but "visualise the main areas of innovation and study the relationships between the city, bus and the users."

Of course, few concepts ever make it into metal, although some ideas feed through into real vehicles. The winner has snazzy ideas, such as bogies that rotate allowing the wheel vehicle to move sideways into a bus bay. But looking at the Daru-Groult bus, apart from the lack of an engine (it seems to run on ultra-flat, ultra lightweight batteries) The Whisperer wonders how it would gain a Certificate of Initial Fitness – especially with its open rear platform!?

Have you got any industry whispers?

The Whisperer has an ear for industry gossip. Funny, serious, or just tongue-in-cheek, please pass it on. Discretion is assured! If you've heard any rumours then let me know care of mike.morgan@route-one.net

Letters

The Editor would be delighted to receive your opinions either by e-mail: mike.morgan@route-one.net or fax: 0870 241 8891 or by post to: Mike Morgan, Editor, routeONE, Expo Publishing, Suite 4, Century House, Towermead Business Park, Fletton, Peterborough PE2 9DY

Royal Ascot rip-off

Letter of the WEEK

WHAT planet are the organisers of Royal Ascot - this year at York - actually on?

I've taken two coaches to Royal Ascot this year, on two days, only for my drivers to discover there are no facilities for them. On Tuesday they weren't even provided with toilets (although this was rectified on Wednesday).

I wouldn't expect free refreshments, but the organiser should at least provide some facilities for drivers to buy tea, coffee and sandwiches. After all, we're being charged £80 per coach for parking – in return for what? And it's not as if there are only a few coaches either.

To add insult to injury, on Tuesday evening the grass in the parking area was mown, so now our returning passengers are walking grass cuttings into the coaches – creating another cleaning job.

It's hard enough getting coach drivers, without having them effectively caged up for 10 hours without any facilities in this day and age. It's just not on.

Royal Ascot has a captive market and is abusing it. It should at least treat coach drivers like humans. I'll bet that the organisers enjoy better facilities! I wonder what other operators think?

David Green, Proprietor, Travelgreen Coaches, Doncaster.

Nick Smith, Royal Ascot, Head of PR replies: "It's not something we've ever thought of. It falls outside our remit. But if we get significant feedback it's something we'd look at doing."

So, just why was I failed?

ONE of my coaches has just failed its MoT for having a Halon fire extinguisher? This hasn't been a problem in the past, so what's changed?

Concerned Welsh operator, Name and address supplied

VOSA replies: "Halon is an ozone-depleting substance which is why the EU has banned its use and it is now illegal to operate buses, minibuses and coaches with fire extinguishers containing Halon 1211 and Halon 1301. Since 1 November 2004 a fire extinguisher containing Halon is considered a reason for failure on any Class VI vehicle presented for test.

"Any Halon fire extinguishers on vehicles should be replaced with extinguishers, containing water or foam, marked BS5423 or EN3 and have a minimum fire rating of at least 8A or 21B. The outside of the extinguisher will indicate whether the contents are Halon.An Advice Note to PSV operators was given out to operators/presenters several months before it became a failure item. This information was also available on the website."

Fair play needed

I HAVE sent the following letter about recent problems, to the Paris Tourist Office. I would be interested to know if other operators are having similar problems?

"We are one of the leading regional coach touring companies in England and operate weekly tours to Paris throughout the year.

"We therefore pay considerable amounts of money in tolls and Paris parking charges. In addition, we spend thousands and thousands of Euros in French hotels, and our passengers spend heavily at all of our French destinations.

"Since the building of Disneyland near Paris, this has obviously brought in extra coaches, mainly carrying children, which has been detrimental to established tour operators bringing dedicated tours to Paris with adults only.

"In principle, we agreed with the new parking system for coaches, giving us dedicated parking areas when available and clarifying to operators the need for controls.

"We were of the understanding therefore, that coaches who were dropping at hotels or pre-booked restaurants would be given the allowance to do this without having to go to the coach parking areas, often long distances away.

"The police have been over-vigilant once again this year, making constant checks on our vehicles, and last weekend we were told that we could not drop off in the Pantheon area for our passengers to walk to a restaurant that we have booked at least once every week of the year.

"There seems to be some victimisation by the police towards English coaches, and we need urgent clarification on this point.

"It is also noted that at times, some of the coach bays are filled with illegally parked cars, when nothing is done, and we still have the ongoing criminal problem in central Paris, where coaches are broken into on a regular basis, even in supervised areas.

"These matters should be borne in mind when promoting the city for the Olympic Games. If visitors cannot be treated fairly in normal times, how can they be expected to be treated during an event such as the Olympics?

"I would be most grateful to receive a reply."

DJ Parry, Managing Director, Parrys International, Cheslyn Hay

and finally.. Dennis Falcon writes

Alternative awards

IF YOU run buses you are spoilt for choice. Next week, it's the National Transport Awards at a swanky London hotel, where you might win Bus Operator of the Year.

In October, there are the route**ONE** Excellence Awards to be announced at a gala celebration dinner at the National Motorcycle Museum, where you might pick up Bus Operator of the Year or one of 10 other prestigious awards. In November, it's the UK Bus Awards where at a celebratory lunch you might win Bus, etc, etc, or one of a host of other glittering awards.

Of course, not everyone wants to be in the spotlight. Still, the non-combatants can at least have some fun speculating who might pick up the next batch of awards. Indeed, they might be wondering whether previous winners have any more tricks up their sleeves. For example, is there any truth in the rumour that Blazefield have ordered lederhosen for their drivers on leather-seated services X36 and 662? Is Brian Souter going to acquire some 15-metre triple-deckers so that he can offer £1 season tickets for the expanding Megabus commuter market? Or, has the Trent Barton management team finally found the crock of gold at the end of their Rainbow Routes and retired quietly on the proceeds?

Joking apart, there can be no doubt that rewarding and promoting success provides a competitive spur for everyone in the industry. It helps raise standards and encourages the spread of good practice. Equally, naming and shaming can have a similar effect on those at the bottom of the pile. But, there aren't currently any awards for the worst in class in the coach and bus industry. Now with your help, I am going to put this right.

So let me introduce you to the first ever Bus Industry Worst Awards.

There are four categories of award and I'm looking for your nominations in any or all of them.

First, ***Worst Bus Operator of the Year***. This will go to the nominee operator who has not only shot himself, (or herself), in the foot by providing the least reliable service, but also caused most harm to the reputation of the industry as a whole, either locally or nationally.

Second, ***The Worst Regulator of the Year***. This will go to the nominee regulator, VOSA, Traffic Commissioner, Health and Safety Executive, OFT etc, who has done the least to help those of us who are trying to do the best we can for our customers in what are often difficult circumstances.

Third, ***The Worst Public Authority of the Year***. This will go to the nominee authority that has done the least to help buses (or coaches) and their passengers by their actions (or inactions) as Highway Authority, Transport Authority or PTE.

Fourth, and finally, ***The Worst New Legislation of the Year***. This will go to the nominee European Commission or British Government Department (and we mustn't forget the Scottish and Welsh legislatures here), which has been responsible for the most pointless or expensive piece of legislation that has been inflicted on our industry.

I am sure that you are already beginning to think of who might win - or is that lose?

Will the Public Authority Award go to Merseyside PTE for promoting its tram with added Quality Contracts, or to Liverpool City Council for objecting to it?

Is there a Commissioner who is too soft on the cowboys or a VOSA team in your area, which behaves as though they are on loan from the KGB? Is the Worst New Legislation the Working Time Directive or the PSV Accessibility Regulations or ...? And, who IS the Worst Operator... Well, now's your chance to name and shame them all.

Sending in your nominations couldn't be easier. All you have to do is e-mail your proposals to me, dennis.falcon@route-one.net with details of the culprit, the award selected and the reasons why they qualify, before 14 July.

You can submit as many nominations as you wish and I guarantee that your anonymity will be protected. I will publish the results in a future Dennis Falcon column for all to see.

The good news is that Mrs F is quite taken with the concept and has agreed to fund a new wooden spoon for the winner in each category, which I undertake to send personally to the Director General, Chief Executive, Managing Director, Minister, European Commissioner, or Traffic Commissioner, etc, of your choice.

So, I will delay you no more. Start sending me your e-mail nominations. As they say on those TV shows, "the lines are now open."

● Dennis Falcon is a *nom de plume* for a top bus industry executive well-known for his forthright opinions.

Your weekly report by the industry's leading legal journalist, Mike Jewell, who covers all the

Wilbys takeover is now authorised

After a wheel loss incident, two previous Public Inquiries, and a 90% MoT failure rate, Wilbys Coaches of Brigg has lost its O-licence. However Ben George Travel is to take over the business, subject to stringent conditions

THE COMPANY, of 10 West Street, Hibaldstow, Brigg, North Lincolnshire, operating 13 vehicles, had appeared at two previous Public Inquiries. Its licence was suspended and curtailed from 21 vehicles to eight at a public inquiry in January 2002 and it had a formal warning at a Public Inquiry in September 2004 (routeONE, News, 16 June).

For the company, Chris Charlesworth said the business had been established for 35 years. It is profitable and there are adequate maintenance staff, equipment, facilities and systems. However, a lack of management control had led to a low standard of vehicle maintenance and a poor annual test pass rate. The directors, John and Trixie Wilby, want to retire and are hoping for a smooth transition to allow the business to be taken over by Ben George Travel, whose directors are Stephen and John Easton.

Vehicle Examiner Andrew Corbett said a maintenance investigation was carried out after a report from member of the public about a wheel becoming detached in January 2005.

Records showed failure to make daily checks

Eleven vehicles were examined and three immediate prohibitions, three delayed prohibitions and nine defect notices were issued. There were no maintenance records for five vehicles. Mr Wilby said two of these had only been operated for two months. There was no record of any inspection before those vehicles were first used.

The stated inspection period was four weeks, said Mr Corbett, but there were 10 gaps in the inspection records of up to 21 weeks. Records were not always fully completed.

There was no written procedure for checking wheel security. Most driver defect reports ended in July 2004. The roller brake tester was not functioning.

Over the last five years 15 immediate, 19 delayed prohibitions and four variation notices had been issued. Since a maintenance investigation in March 2004, six immediate and nine delayed prohibitions had been issued. The initial failure rate at annual test was 90.48%, compared with the national average of 27.2%. The Commissioner said the MoT test rate was one of the worst he had seen recently and could only be described as appalling.

Transport Manager George Taylor had just taken over at the time of the maintenance investigation. Outlining the systems now in place, he said he made periodic checks to ensure that vehicles were brought in for inspection on time. The roller brake tester had been calibrated and was now in use. One of the vehicles for which there were no records was not in use, but was being kept for preservation. Two newer refurbished vehicles had been introduced to the fleet. Another was currently off the road being refurbished. He would remain Transport Manager until Stephen Easton passed the CPC examination, when he will take a lesser advisory role.

Mr Taylor agreed that, according to records, the driver of a vehicle carrying schoolchildren daily had only carried out a walk-round check nine times since March. The Commissioner said he found it astonishing and did not think the children's parents would be very happy.

Mr Taylor said the two vehicles presented for MoTs since he had taken over had both failed. He agreed he was struggling to put things right, saying that he had only gone in to help.

Mr Wilby said all drivers received training from an engineering consultant after the last Public Inquiry, but four had since left. Some inspection record gaps were due to vehicles being taken off the road for big jobs. He would have no involvement in the management of the new company.

"If one more wheel comes off any of your vehicles you might as well send your licence back in the post,"

Asked about an allegation that fares were being taken on an unregistered schools service, Mr Wilby said some of the parents paid daily, others weekly and monthly. The service operated for 15 years but ceased after the wheel loss incident when half the parents decided to use another operator. They enquired about registering the service, but they were told it was ineligible for fuel duty rebate.

Stephen Easton said public safety would be at the top of their agenda. He would undertake that training would be carried out and that there would be independent audits on vehicle condition.

They would invest in newer vehicles even if it meant cutting the fleet down. It was a profitable business which he felt could be turned round with a lot of hard work. He agreed that they could not turn it round overnight, but hoped to

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reach a satisfactory situation after a couple of months. Financial evidence was heard in private.

Mr Charlesworth said that as far as Wilbys was concerned he did not seek to defend the indefensible. Mr Taylor had overseen significant improvements since his appointment in March.

Making the revocation and disqualification orders, the Commissioner said that 40% of the vehicles checked had been prohibited. The latest wheel loss incident had not been reported to VOSA or the Traffic Area Office and the company had repaired the vehicle before it could be independently examined. He added: "This operator lacks the ability to operate safe and reliable passenger carrying vehicles."

Granting a licence to Ben George Travel, Mr Easton undertook that:

- All vehicles not annual tested in the last month be tested within two weeks.
- The wheel torque procedure to be set out in writing and signed as read by the fitting staff.
- Roller brake tests to be carried out at every safety inspection, at four weekly intervals, and to be recorded.
- Within six months the company's systems and vehicle condition would be independently audited.

"If one more wheel comes off any of your vehicles you might as well send your licence back in the post," the Commissioner told Mr Easton.

Truronian faces Commissioner over hours and tacho offences

Large parts of Cornwall could be left unserved if the Traffic Commissioner decides to revoke Truronian's licence after it fell foul of the 'minefield' of tachograph and drivers' hours regulations

ONE OF the largest operators in Cornwall, Truronian Ltd, has to wait to see what action the Western Traffic Commissioner Philip Brown is going to take following convictions for drivers' hours and tachograph offences.

The company, of 24 Lemon Street, Truro, had been called before the Commissioner at a Plymouth Public Inquiry.

The Commissioner heard that in January the company had been fined £11,200 and ordered to pay £5,000 prosecution costs for 70 drivers' hours and tachograph offences. Fifty-eight offences related to failures to use the tachograph in accordance with the regulations during the spring of 2004. There were a further six offences of permitting drivers to drive for more than 4½ hours without taking the required break. Twenty seven drivers were fined amounts between £75 and £150 for a series of offences, with each driver also ordered to pay £70 prosecution costs.

"VOSA said the company had clearly breached the regulations and had not provided sufficient driver training."

VOSA said the company had clearly breached the regulations and had not provided sufficient driver training.

David Rabey, Managing Director since 1987, said it provided a substantial network of school bus and private services around mid-Cornwall. He considered the company had been punished enough by the magistrates and if it was stripped of its licence it would be forced to fold. They had not been warned by VOSA of the stringent rules about recording drivers' hours. He maintained that the combination of the EC and domestic drivers' hours rules created a minefield for coach companies.

"I accept that ignorance is no defence," said Mr Rabey. "But it would be exceptional for a large operation such as ours not to show minor tachograph infringements on occasions. There is no incentive for drivers to work extra hours and/or breach the regulations."

Truronian has to wait for a written decision

"David Rabey... considered the company had been punished enough by the magistrates."

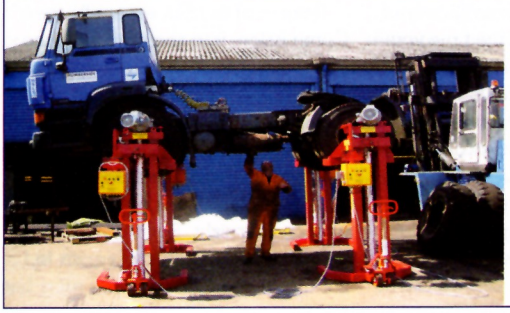
He added that new checks had been put in place to stop further infringements and the company is keen to move forward and expand, with the backing of employers and Cornwall County Council, whose principal transport officer Stephen Nicholson gave evidence in support of Truronian.

David Redgewell, South West Director of passenger group Transport 2000, said that Truronian folding would be a disaster for Cornwall, its rural inhabitants and its economy. Truronian provided a lot of council contract bus services around Helston and Truro.

"It is not as if there are depots full of coaches and buses sitting around ready to take over those services run by the company," he said.

The Commissioner is to announce his decision in writing at a future date.

BRITON UK VEHICLE LIFTS



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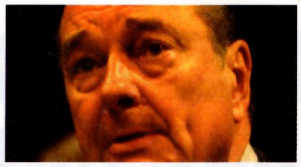
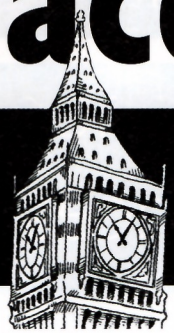
Jacques attack!





After the resounding French 'Non' to the EU constitution, Jacques Chirac has grasped the opportunity to turn the focus to events abroad – and what could be more appropriate in the 200th anniversary year of France's defeat at Trafalgar?

"CRISIS? What crisis?" This innocent – but now legendary – comment was made to journalists by then Prime Minister Jim Callaghan, on returning from a foreign trip to be greeted by a late-1970s Britain gripped by strikes, hyper-inflation, and a pervading air of panic and gloom.

In a sense, his reaction was understandable. There was no particular crisis at that moment.

But the media was keen to whip up hysteria about the general situation; and Sunny Jim's political detractors – not least the leader of Her Majesty's Opposition, one Mrs M. Thatcher – were poised to exploit the feeling of national chaos as part of the campaign which led to the famous Conservative victory in 1979. And the press and the Opposition were able to point to the remark as evidence of the Prime Minister's complacency: there he was, swanning about in some foreign capital, apparently unaware that things back home were falling to bits.

Westminster Watch is reminded of this situation by what is happening in the EU at the moment. It takes a big British heart to feel sorry for Jacques Chirac, but he has something of a Callaghan-esque air about him these days. It's all gone wrong. Europe, that is. His own proud nation, which gave birth to the European idea, and formed it in its own image, has taken fright and spurned his plea to support the EU constitution over which he had laboured so long and so mightily. And not just the French; the Dutch as well – and by an even greater margin. The UK has indefinitely postponed its referendum on the issue, and other countries are doing the same. The great carthorse has stopped in the middle of the road, and refuses to take another step.

A crisis? Well, for Chirac, yes.

While referendums can always be re–run until the people give the right answer, something fundamental is shifting in Europe. The French are said to have rejected the constitution because it would have enshrined "Anglo–Saxon" (i.e. Thatcherite) economic principles into the European model, threatening the systems of government subsidy and social welfare to which France is addicted. Its adoption might have spelt the beginning of the end of the dominance of "the French way of doing things" in the EU.

Keeping radical French farmers happy would boost Chirac's flagging popularity at home

This crisis has coincided awkwardly with a row about money – never a nice thing in a family situation. In answer to Uncle Jacques' and Uncle Gerhard's demand for the ending of the British rebate, Tony Blair has – with a smile – agreed willingly to discuss it, as long as they can also review the entire EU budget, and especially the huge agricultural subsidy, 46% of which finds its way into French pockets. Otherwise, no deal, OK?

Suddenly – and not for the first time – Tony bears a striking resemblance to his predecessor but one (except she may not have smiled). Although there are plenty of battles ahead – and by the time you read this, we will know what (if anything) the EU leaders have been able to thrash out at their summit – he looks somehow in control.

No doubt this has something to do with the UK Presidency of the EU in the second half of this year, and our hosting of the G8 conference next month. But it may also be because he senses that, in an enlarged, more diverse Community, one in which Britain is economically stronger and France weaker, "the British way of doing things" looks more like the future. In European terms, Tony's hour may not yet have come. But the clock is ticking.

Reform of the EU, especially the Commission, into something which Britain would feel more comfortable with, is no small undertaking. Europe's instinct to regulate, constrain and control – in ways with which the UK road transport industry is all too familiar – is not going to happen overnight. But change is in the air. And one politician's crisis is another one's opportunity.

It's all Chinese to me!

The second in the new series by Dave Shoesmith, the top-level industry executive writing under a pseudonym. This week he's read the reviews and ponders whether or not he should buy coaches built in the Far East

Shadowy figure: Dave Shoesmith writing exclusively for routeONE

SO, the Chinese invasion has started and the world will never be the same.

This is not an excerpt from Sky News but the recent reports of the arrival (at last) of the King Long coach into the UK. Sadly I am old enough to remember the Portuguese and Scandinavian invasions of the late '60s and early '70s followed by the Belgian and German invasion of the late '70s and early '80s which dramatically changed the face of coach production in this country. Nowadays there is very little coach production left intact apart from the excellent new Plaxton company whose quality management and workforce have set standards rarely equalled in the long history at Scarborough.

Let me put the marker down now and state I will not be an early customer for the new King Long product. This is not down to any 'Little Britain' or indeed 'Little Europe' attitude. I am always happy to consider any product on the market but I have to convince myself that by the time I wish to sell it, someone else will want to buy it at a sensible price. At this point I again seem to be at odds with much of the industry. It never ceases to amaze me how an operator can decide to buy a new coach because it looks 'different'. Never does it seem to cross his or her mind what it will be worth in five or so years let alone parts availability. We are not talking about the family car here but often the company's biggest investment. Surely we need a bit of financial planning or perhaps people know something I don't when it comes to coach purchase.

I was an early operator of Bova products, both Europa and Futura and both types proved excellent buys and rewarded me with good residual values. Unlike some other imports of the time, which quickly disappeared leaving a handful of unsupported minimal value coaches, from the start Bova had one major factor in their favour – an established strong dealer. I have to admit I have never regarded the Futura as a 'good looker' but it goes to prove the old adage that looks are not everything.

Reading the press reviews of the new Chinese offering it seems they too have fallen into the "yes we know this is not quite right but production vehicles will be" trap. Single glazing! Surely the effort put into producing this coach would have been better rewarded with more attention to detail. It is not rocket science to establish what the industry regards as essential features of a new coach and yet like many before them the Chinese or their acolytes are left with egg (fu yung?) on their faces. If I have a new contract that picks up every morning at 0730hrs and on Monday the coach arrived at 0945hrs it is unlikely the customer will be happy with my excuse that in future it will arrive at the time he wants but I thought 0730hrs was a bit early so I sent it later!

Surely we have to judge our suppliers in the same way as we are judged. I am fed up of complaining about poor back-up from certain suppliers over a weekend. What is the excuse I am given? "But it's a Sunday" Am I missing something here? It has always been my impression that summer weekends are busy times for the industry with most of the country's coaches on the road. It is not unreasonable therefore to expect dealers to be properly staffed, not just having someone on-call with a dodgy mobile.

This brings me back to that key decision of what to buy. Do we really want to risk not being able to get assistance in an emergency? No matter how impressive a vehicle might look, it is of little benefit to you when it breaks down and is off the road for three days waiting for a spare part to arrive. Sadly in many cases the answer must be yes because there are plenty of coaches out there that must run on a wing and a prayer judging by their reputation.

If we start to delve deeper however into operating cost for different types of vehicle then we really are opening the proverbial 'can of worms'. Not many of my local competitors claim to have any cost system at all. It appears quotations are given on the basis of knocking ten pounds off everybody else's price. Believe me it is true and yet those responsible are usually the ones who complain most about low rates. A tour operator that I have worked with for many years recently got a call from a very high-profile company offering to do the work at whatever rate I charged last year. Naturally my customer was intrigued by this, bearing in mind the operator did not know my rate. He was even more intrigued when he told the operator a spoof lower figure and was assured that would be undercut. But we are only scratching the surface here. I do not intend here to produce cost tables for those in the industry who, if they do understand them at all, don't bother to use them.

> **"Yes, we know this is not quite right but production vehicles will be."**

Yet why should I worry if you all rush out and buy something that I would have nothing to do with and then operate it at uneconomic rates? All I would suggest is you look in your collections of trade magazines from days gone by, find the articles about the operators shouting loudest with regards to their new coach, or how wonderful their company is and ask yourself the question – whatever happened to them?

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A touch of luxury

The flagship 9700 is a high-spec two-axle integral that takes Volvo into new territory

You read about Volvo's 9700 first in routeONE, then we brought you the first pictures of the right-hand-drive vehicle as soon as it landed. This was followed by our indepth review of the launch. Now Mike Morgan tells you what it's like to drive in this exclusive routeONE Test Drive

VOLVO Bus launched its luxury 9700 coach into the UK and Ireland last month.

The Volvo 9700 Prestige Plus, entirely designed and manufactured in-house, has the Volvo core values of quality, safety and environmental care very much in evidence.

Speaking at the launch, Volvo Bus Managing Director Mike Ball said, "The new 9700 Prestige Plus is a highly significant addition to the top luxury end of our coach range, truly a Volvo through and through. With a very high specification and complete support from Volvo and its dealers."

The 9700 was previewed at a series of road shows running in May and early June.

There are two demonstration vehicles – a silver-painted coach built in Finland, and a maroon-painted coach built in Poland. Both now go onto extended demonstrations during the summer and autumn, with first customer deliveries expected early in 2006.

But first, the silver coach was made available for this exclusive Test Drive.

It was routeONE that first revealed the possibility of a right-hand-drive 9700 when the coach made its pubic debut on the European show circuit, and we also brought you the first pictures of the right-hand-drive prototype within days of it landing in the UK (routeONE, News, 5 May).

Build

The 9700s destined for the UK will be produced at Volvo Buses' European complete vehicle plant in Wroclaw, Poland, which has just celebrated its 10th anniversary of coach and bus production. Substantial investment at Wroclaw has given it annual capacity of 2,500 vehicles, with 500 complete vehicles delivered last year.

With the Volvo 9700 range, the emphasis is on quality, driver and passenger comfort, with the reassurance of a complete aftermarket support package. Volvo is also synonymous with safety and the new 9700 Prestige Plus has many class leading safety features.

The all stainless steel construction incorporates Volvo's Front Impact Protection system (FIP). Frontal impact is the most common type of accident for coaches and buses, and with FIP, Volvo's engineers have developed a front end structure that substantially improves the way energy generated in a crash is directed. The 9700 also complies with R66 rollover requirements.

In line with all models in the Volvo TX range, the 9700 has the latest generation of Volvo's Electronic Braking System (EBS5), which now incorporates Volvo's Electronic Stability Program (ESP). ESP senses if a vehicle is losing road grip or running the risk of overturning, automatically making counteracting adjustments ➢

through decreasing engine torque and applying brake pressure to individual wheels.

Externally, alloy wheels and Xenon headlights add to the distinctive, yet conservative styling. Volvo badging is discreet, yet conspicuous.

Meanwhile, Dynafleet, Volvo's vehicle management tool, is available as an option, with the ability through on-line connection to provide key information in real-time on, for example, the location of the coach, its fuel consumption, driver's hours and service requirements.

Passenger impressions

The comprehensive level of 'standard' specification means that the 9700 is delivered from the factory as a complete coach package without the need for further additions or modifications.

Volvo says it sets new standards for passengers. The theatre floor concept, with its sloping floor and theatre seating combined with large tinted side windows, is geared to improve vision for all passengers who also get authentic concert quality sound thanks to the advanced Volvo Sound and Vision on-board entertainment package that incorporates radio, CD and DVD, complete with two TFT monitors and sub woofer speakers, GPS navigation for both driver and passenger viewing.

It is noticeable when riding on the 9700 that it is designed and built as a complete vehicle. The body is taught, combining effectively with the independent front suspension to deliver a better quality of ride comfort than comparable body-on-chassis combinations. Interior noise levels average 68.5dB(A), while at the front the level rises to 71.5dB(A), which is at the top end of the standard expected from this class of coach.

Personal space is enhanced thanks to the extra 200cm provided by the 12.2-metre extended length, and elbow-room can be increased by sliding the aisle-side seats. Key features include 49 Volvo TS2000 seats with integral three point seat belts, and air conditioning. A demountable centre sunken toilet is provided, while a water boiler and drinks dispenser is fitted behind a lockable shutter on the side of this unit.

A Volvo 'Safety on Board' pack includes aircraft-style safety cards at all seats and a safety briefing video, which can be used by the driver to explain the safety features of the coach to passengers. A European touring kit including a spare mirror, wiper and wiper arm, headlight, cleaning tools and a spare window hammer is also included.

Driver impressions

"The driver is not neglected either, with a totally new driver's area giving a better overview and enhanced control." Well, that's what it says in the sales blurb, so what is it like in practice?

The new chunky four-spoke steering wheel is more car-like than ever before, and it has buttons to control the audio system… and Volvo has returned to its tried and trusted location for the steering column adjustment – i.e. a foot pedal.

Although the steering wheel rim feels too thick on first acquaintance, it takes no more than a few left and right-hand turns to encourage familiarity. However, the substantial spokes do obscure those switches fitted below the panel that includes the necessary dials and now-obligatory information display.

Operated as before from one of the right-hand steering column stalks, this information display is more driver-friendly. It comes as part of the revised vehicle electronics, which thankfully includes a less-strident warning bleep. Well-done Volvo – it's now easy to scroll through the essential vehicle-related information and a pleasure to indicate any change of direction.

Test Drive took the 9700 around the routeONE circuit that includes a mix of c

Everything is within easy reach, though some of the switches are up to the left, others below the GPS display-cum-reversing monitor, and yet more on the right of the panel, while, as already mentioned, some are annoyingly below the central display. However, the reversing camera would be more useful if the monitor was nearer to either of the exterior mirrors, because that's where the driver's eyes are focused and it's impossible to continue with confidence when switching attention to the dash.

The driver is blessed with a very comfortable Isringhausen suspension seat, and for the most part has excellent forward vision that is remarkably free of blind-spots. It is, therefore, appropriate for the 9700 driver to have the automated I-Shift gearbox for added convenience.

I-Shift offers clutchless gearchanges that can either be operated manually or left to function in automatic mode. When first introduced to the coach market in October 2004 I-Shift worked well, but had a couple of flaws – it allowed the coach to roll back when stopped on an incline, and did not share the driver's ability to adapt to the changing road conditions ahead. The latest generation of I-Shift is a gem. It cleverly engages the brakes when stationary – if required, and is much smarter at stirring the cogs.

It also links-in superbly with the

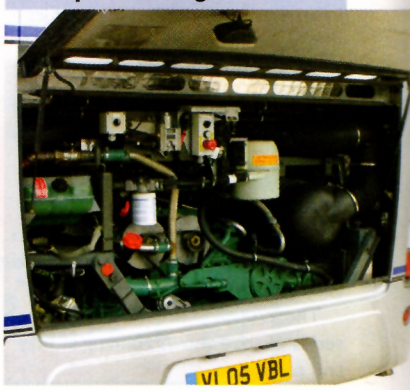
Close-up

Under-rack service units complement quality feel

Volvo's I-Shift gearbox is now a delight to use in Auto mode

Comprehensive dash layout puts everything within reach

Prestige Plus is fitted with 420bhp 12-litre engine



iving, including rural Northamptonshire

braking system. On an I-Shift vehicle, the system mixes Volvo engine brake (which is used by the I-Shift anyway to synchronise engine revs at gearshifts), exhaust pressure regulator, gearbox retarder, and foundation brakes. The selection depends on speed, brake pedal pressure, etc, and also on the state of the vehicle - i.e. the VEB is deployed in its effective operating range, which depends on engine speed and gear ratio at the time. So pressing the pedal 'x' degrees at 100km/h gets a different selection from pressing the pedal at 60km/h. There's even a boost-function that keeps engine revs in a higher range to increase the effectiveness of the retarder to the point where its performance can be accurately predicted.

Crew provision includes driver's bunk accessed by contortionists via a hatch opposite the toilet entrance, while the better-than-average courier seat is endowed with height adjustment, space for feet, and a vanity mirror on the lid of the very useful dash-storage space, which is alongside the fridge.

Performance

Launched initially on the rear engine Volvo B12B chassis in two axle configuration, 12.2m in length and with a height of 3.6m, the driveline combines the Volvo DH12D 12 litre engine rated at 420bhp with the I-Shift gearbox. The power output will be uprated to 460bhp when Euro 4 engines become available next year, and the range for the UK and Irish markets is to be further developed in 2006 to provide a three-axle version at 13.7m long and 3.7m high.

Meanwhile the I-Shift/420bhp combination ensures a relaxing, though not exhilarating, drive. Acceleration from 0-30mph is marginally slower than an equivalent B12B with 360bhp engine coupled to five-speed ZF automatic gearbox – those multiple I-Shift changes take fractionally longer. However, the superior torque of the 420bhp engine comes into its own with pulling power that takes the 9700 up from 30mph to 50mph in 11 seconds, while steady tacho traces are achievable on all but the steepest motorway inclines, and our test ascent of Rockingham Hill was a record-breaking 54.4secs thanks to a very smart automated down-change that prevented speed loss at the critical point on the hill.

Overall fuel consumption was consistently better than a 360bhp B12B auto's test average 9.1mpg (routeONE, Test Drive, 14 April). The three sections of the test route started with 10mpg when using the motorway from Warwick to Newport Pagnall. This was followed by 10.2mpg on the trunk roads that took us to south Lincolnshire, while 10.3mpg was delivered on the cross-country mix on the return to Warwick.

Although this is a familiar circuit, the opportunity was taken to test out the satellite navigation system. As drivers who are accustomed to GPS will testify, it's a far from perfect way of finding your way around. In Bedford it issued an instruction that would have taken the coach along a road with a weight restriction, while when passing M1 junction 15 it thought this was the A509, which is junction 14. However, GPS avoided a mistaken turn from the M42 on to the M6 north when the M6 south was wanted, proving that the system can avoid embarrassing wrong turns.

routeONE verdict

The 9700 is a splendid coach. It is the best Volvo coach on the market and should have little difficulty winning orders. It drives brilliantly and holds the road extremely well.

In particular it should appeal to operators who have standardised on Volvo for their other coaching requirements. Our test drive demonstrated that this is a coach with sufficient virtue to overcome resistance to a newcomer built in Poland. The proof of the pudding will be in the value realised when 9700s come on the second-hand market. The answer will depend upon the success with which Volvo is able to reassure the market that its parts and service is geared-up to provide the necessary support.

Facts & Figures

On-the-road price	£225,000
Length	12.2 metres
Height	3.55 metres
Width	2.55 metres
Wheelbase	6 metres
Engine	horizontal six-cylinder Euro3 Volvo DH12
Power	420bhp (309kW) @ 1,200rpm
Torque	150LBf.ft (204Nm) @ 1,200 rpm
Gearbox	automated 12-speed Volvo I-shift
Unladen weight	13,740kg
Gross vehicle weight	18,000kg
Tyres	315/80R 22.5

routeONE rating

Engine	8/10	Performance	8/10
Ride	9/10	Handling	9/10
Style	8/10	Comfort	9/10
Value for money	9/10	Overall	9/10

The inside story...

Emphasis on quality and comfort is reflected by the interior lighting

Entrance has good handrails

Tailored for premium coaching

COACH&BUS live 2005
5th - 6th OCTOBER, NEC

The 'get behind the wheel' show

Evaluating vehicles on an individual basis is fine, but how do the latest buses and coaches compare on the road? Come to the NEC in October and get behind the wheel* of a host of vehicles from leading marques all in the same day. Not only can you pre-book to put vehicles through their paces on the open road, you can also put your skills to the test on a special driving skills test supervised by the Coach Displays team, organisers of the Brighton Rally.

Just another good reason to be part of Coach & Bus Live 2005.

To pre-register for fast track entry and full details about your chance to win a luxury weekend for two in Rome, visit: www.coachandbuslive.com

Coach & Bus Live, NEC Birmingham. Wednesday 5th – Thursday 6th October 2005

* Participation in the test driving programme is available only to holders of an appropriate driving licence and subject to rules stipulated by the event organisers. See website for full details.

Key to success

The humble PC is now at the heart of almost every coach and bus operation in the country. Where once a computer was the exception, it is now the rule. And the applications have increased far beyond word-processing and spreadsheets. Whether it is in the workshop, traffic office, or the Managing Director's desk, computers have a critical role in running your business

IT PAYS to keep up-to-date with the latest developments when it comes to computer hardware and software.

PCs have become so familiar that no operator is complete without them. And, we're also aware that a PC gives you access to the internet, and many are getting wise to the possibilities that open up when you add-on satellite positioning technology.

If you want to know the location of your vehicles every two seconds... it's possible. Recordings and downloads are, of course, available... via your PC.

You can check drivers' speeds, timesheets, routes taken, while giving you a mechanism for dealing with complaints or accidents.

Then there's options that are specifically targeting coach tour operators - quotations, coach hire and contract diary, invoicing, work ticket and roster production right through to management accounts and statistics.

All this is at your finger tips as suppliers continue to fine-tune, enabling coach and bus operators to think positively about optimisation of both internal and external (online) systems, while the role of the internet becomes ever more important.

Major updates of existing software packages are the order of the day. In some cases this is driven by new legislation such as the Working Time Directive, whereas in other cases the key factor is system functionality, and this is increasingly becoming available through dynamic web-based links.

Meanwhile the spread of technology as a tool to improve efficiency is affecting even more aspects of running a business.

Software worth its salt must allow speedy input of data. This in turn should give you very quick access to all key information.

Even driver training – for so long an expensive and time-consuming on-the-road experience – has succumbed to IT.

Route leaned and fuel efficient techniques can be taught using specially-tailored software.

Should you want expert legal advice at the click of a mouse, that's also available. Is there no end to what computers can do?

Ambitious systems plans ahead

COACH DIRECT, the UK coach and bus booking service, continues to fine-tune its IT systems for the joint benefit of clients and operators alike. As Managing Director Karl Lapage explains: "The most important driving momentum right now is for us to fully exploit every booking enquiry by careful and planned optimisation of both our internal and external (online) systems."

As within most industry sectors, speed of response is the most critical factor for business success, and this is indeed very true within the transport sector where clients are looking for the right solution, both quickly and at the right price.

Recent website work and enhancements to the back-end database have given Coach Direct a much swifter response mechanism for its clients. It has also seen the introduction of a much cleaner and optimised site where operators can quickly logon to view companies' current 'live' jobs, and the facility to submit their quotations in 'real time' whilst online.

Further enhancements to the site will soon see improved search facilities that will allow searches to be carried on particular day(s) that the operator knows he has availability, as well as improved searches under particular towns and/or counties across the UK.

Looking further ahead, the company is currently undertaking a much wider functional overview that will (late 2005/ early 2006) see the rolling out of a dynamic web-based booking system, which will fully automate the front and back end process and give authorised users a wider range of facilities and enquiry/booking control.

For the technically minded out there, this new system will be based on a fully resilient client/server architecture that will be provisioned on multiple web servers over an XDSL Link.

● **Contact Coach Direct on 0870 550 2069 or visit www.coachdirect.co.uk**

Working Time Directive enhancement and new Tour Booking System

DISTINCTIVE SYSTEMS has completed a major update to its private hire and contract booking system, and the York-based company also reports that its new Microsoft SQL Server 2000 based Tour Booking System (TBS) is now rapidly approaching completion.

The Coach Manager PHC SQL upgrade takes care of all the statutory record keeping and reporting requirements imposed on operators by the new Road Transport (Working Time) Regulations.

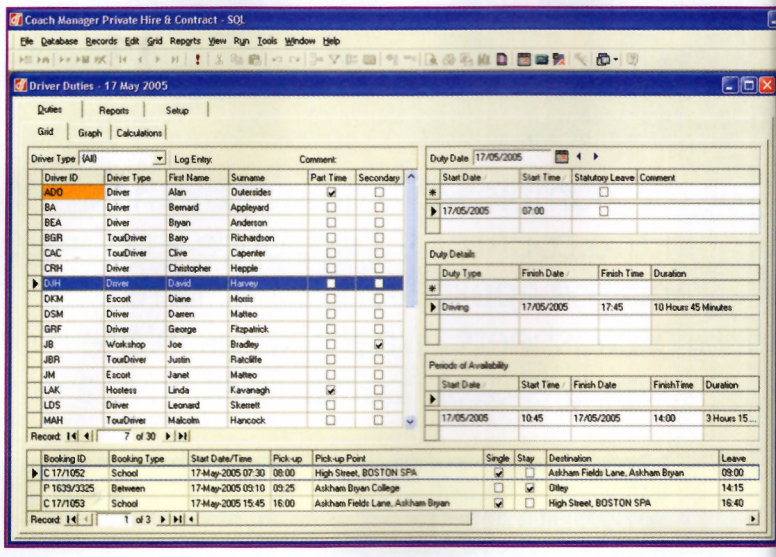
The update enhances the existing Driver Duties facility, to allow Periods of Availability to be recorded. The work ticket has been modified so that a driver can be automatically informed that the time at a destination is a Period of Availability as defined by the regulations. The work ticket also has an area for the driver to record actual duty and availability times.

The update also includes reporting facilities to show the average weekly working time for each driver over the 17 or 26 week reference period.

"A lot of our existing Coach Manager users have been asking us about a possible update," said Distinctive Systems Managing Director Mike Whitehead. "We've not only decided to make the enhancement a standard part of Coach Manager PHC, but we've also decided to build it into our Coach Assistant PHC product. Combined with our recent decision to incorporate both our Quotation and Pricing System and our Community Transport System into the entry level product, Coach Assistant now represents absolutely incredible value for money."

Although Distinctive Systems' Tour Booking System (TBS) will be launched at Coach & Bus Live 2005 on 5 – 6 October, individual demonstrations will commence well ahead of that date.

TBS has been designed from the ground up to be a fully fledged client/server product. This not only guarantees a state-of-the-art foundation for an in-house reservation system, but also, for the first time ever, gives operators the capability of hosting their own fully featured Internet booking system.



Internet booking capability will be provided by the optional TBS Web Pack. The Pack will handle Internet enquiries, bookings and payments for both agents and direct clients. Agents and clients will have direct secure access to the reservation system with their bookings going directly into the database alongside those created by the operator's own staff.

TBS will be launched with every last feature that a coach tour operator could possibly wish for, but over the succeeding months additional functionality will be incorporated that will gradually open up the appeal of the system to an ever wider range of different types of operation.

TBS is fully integrated with Coach Manager PHC SQL DSL's established SQL Server 2000-based private hire and contract booking system.

● **Contact Distinctive Systems on 01904 692269 or visit www.distinctive-systems.com**

www.coachdirect.co.uk

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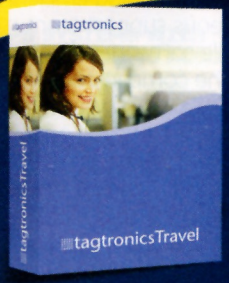

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Tel: 01254 297732 Fax: 01254 698484 Email: sales@tagtronics.co.uk

Driving towards lower costs

INOVAS LTD the award-winning driver training specialists, has launched version 3 of its market-leading driver training software system Video Reduction Trainer (VRT). The system was demonstrated for the first time at this year's 56th UITP World Congress and Exhibition in Rome two weeks ago.

Engine manufacturers and training providers are already in negotiation with Inovas to integrate and embed the system within current services offered. Additionally, evidence of drivers' fuel efficiency and greenhouse gas reduction initiatives is an attraction.

Stuart Miller, Sales Director said: "We knew we were onto something big and exciting when we demonstrated the working prototype to industry insiders in the winter of 2004."

During the four years since Inovas' driver route training and hazard awareness system, VRT, was launched, the product has, in conjunction with the needs of global transport operators, evolved to become an extremely powerful tool for addressing the needs of both defensive and remedial driver training alike.

The system encourages a more fuel-efficient driving style by measuring the acceleration, braking, fuel consumption and speed of their drive. When compared with the results of an 'expert' driver the trainees, or indeed existing, older drivers, problem areas on the route can be identified at which for example excessive fuel has been used, sudden braking or quick acceleration has occurred.

New and existing drivers can utilize the system to learn routes quickly and thoroughly, increasing their knowledge of detours, hazards and to highlight accident black spots, points of interest and fare stages.

VRT is currently revolutionizing training throughout the industry with many global players across the UK, Europe and North America already benefiting from the system.

"As a leader of driver training solutions in the UK & Europe, we have extensive experience in providing market-leading, cost effective and beneficial driver training solutions that are widely deployed by a diverse customer base," said Stuart Miller.

"2005 will be an exciting year for Inovas with the commercial launch of industry-led new product developments and we welcome the challenges and opportunities that the European & North American transit market will bring us."

Inovas is also supported throughout Europe by business partners within Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, The Netherlands and Sweden.

● **Contact Inovas on 01324 682268 or visit www.innovas.co.uk**

Journey logging and analysis

MISSION IT Journey Logging Software can record the location of your vehicles every two seconds for up to 16 hours. Using the new software, recordings can be downloaded and saved onto a PC.

You can replay the whole route on a map, check speeds, stops, and start/finish times. This is an excellent way of checking drivers' speeds, timesheets, routes taken and dealing with complaints or accidents. You can replay routes from different days side-by-side for comparison.

For each trip or route you can record the driver, vehicle, route description, date, client and other notes. It is then possible to view all trips by driver, vehicle, etc.

You can add locations of importance to you (e.g. client sites or pick up/drop off points) which will be displayed on all maps. While replaying a route you can add notes and information about specific points in the journey (e.g. lunch breaks, accidents, breakdowns).

The system uses a portable GPS logging unit - these units can store up to 30,000 location points, giving you 16 hours of recording if you set the unit to take a reading every two seconds. Alternatively by taking a reading every 15 seconds you would be able to record for 125 hours.

A variety of units are available offering different recording capacities, battery life (typically about 10 hours) and in-vehicle chargers for you to choose from. They are portable and can be moved easily between vehicles.

This software will help reduce costs by allowing better trip optimisation and double-checking of drivers hours/mileages. At only £299 for the software and portable GPS logging units from £150, a multi-vehicle solution is available for less than £1,000.

As this system records location information to be downloaded when the vehicle returns, there are no running or airtime costs.

● **Contact Mission IT on 0845 225 5444 or visit www.transportsoftware.co.uk**

Fully integrated reservations

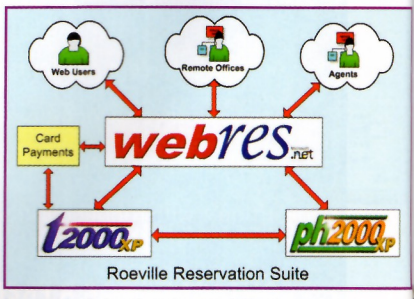
ROEVILLE COMPUTER SYSTEMS is the only software house to offer a fully integrated reservation suite for coach and tour operators. Its powerful software products, coupled with a flexible licensing plan and efficient, courteous support team makes Roeville software a clear winner, says the company.

Its PH2000xp system handles all aspects of coach operation from quotations, coach hire and contract diary, invoicing, work ticket and roster production right through to management accounts and statistics.

Tours 2000xp is the leading coach tour reservation system with features and flexibility far ahead of the field. It handles all aspects of tour, excursion and express bookings and has an impressive customer handling facility including data mining, Mailsort and e-mail support for pinpoint marketing accuracy. In addition to the usual tour reports, there is a full supporting gallery of management reports from budgets to final profit and loss.

Webres.Net is its most recent system, offering an extremely scaleable and flexible data driven web site and public e-commerce portal into Tours 2000xp and PH2000xp. Hosted on its own web-servers Webres.net is a totally managed solution offering the very best in terms of reliability, speed and scalability. The data-driven web site is user configured to suit the operators changing needs, and there are tools for merging text and graphics to create an unlimited library of holiday itineraries. Tours automatically vanish from the system once they have departed ensuring the site is always fresh and up to date.

Customers and travel agents can book on any of your tours or excursions in real time, with seamless card processing and



Roeville Reservation Suite

instant ticketing – enabling you to sell your products 24/7 in much the same manner as the low-cost airlines.

The Roeville team is already working on its generation of modular reservation systems, to be showcased at Coach & Bus Live 2005 in October.

● **Contact Roeville on 01302 841333 or visit www.roeville.com**

Any reservations?

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ph2000XP

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We can supply a full version of our software to install and use for 30 days free of charge. You can then purchase and continue to use the software with all of your data intact, or you can uninstall it.

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Replay Routes

Our new **Journey Logging Software** can record the location of your vehicles every two seconds for up to 16 hours. You can replay the whole route on a map, check speeds, stops, and start/finish times.

Add locations of importance which will be displayed on all maps, and add notes and information about specific points and times in a journey.

Save Money

This system will allow better trip optimisation and double-checking of drivers hours/mileages. A small, portable GPS logger records location information to download when the vehicle returns - eliminating running and airtime costs.

Our software is only **£299**, MapPoint is **£165** and portable GPS logging units that can be moved easily between vehicles are available from just **£150**.

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Compare Trips
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Seamless connections

TAGTRONICS'S VTO (Visual Traffic Office) and TAE (Tours & Excursions) software packages have now been in the marketplace for over seven years.

The VTO package offers a way for clients to seamlessly enter an enquiry, whether it is a single journey, return or contract and print off quotes, confirmations, invoices and work tickets, all of which can be emailed directly from the software.

The software also allows the inputting of pick up points, journey routes and key informa-tion regarding your customers.

From the diary, which allows you to view jobs over a pre selected time period, you can enter the details of the job and copy scheduled work such as school runs week-on-week. You can also define different job types by colour coding and icons for airport transfer, trips abroad etc. Wherever you are in the software, the diary is always available to view.

Many users send invoices and statements directly from the software by email and you can incorporate your company logo on all documentation.

VTO allows you to put multiple jobs on one invoice and keep a comprehensive track of paid and unpaid jobs.

Vehicle section allows you to log details of all servicing, MOTs and history of any parts purchased and fitted.

TAE software simplifies the process of booking tours or excursions.

Rooming listings, insurance reports and seat allocation are all a simple click of a button. The step-by-step process rules out any element of error by not allowing you to go to the next screen until the previous one is completed.

We are currently developing new features as requested by our growing customer base and are constantly looking at new technologies which will be implemented in our forth coming product releases.

● **Contact Tagtronics on 01254 697878 or visit www.tagtronics.co.uk**

routeONE CONTACTS

A K M Techservices
01270 250829

AutoPro Software UK
01928 715962
www.autoprosoftware.com

Coach Direct
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Distinctive Systems Ltd
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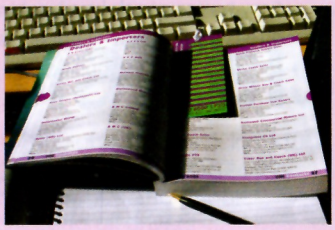
For further details of industry suppliers, manufacturers and operators obtain a copy of the routeONE CONTACTS directory. Ring 0870 241 8745 or email enquiries@route-one.net



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LDV Convoy H Roof 8 Str	2000	02/06	£4,500
LDV Convoy H Roof 16 Str	2000	05/06	£6,750
LDV Convoy H Roof 16 Str	1996	05/06	£2,800
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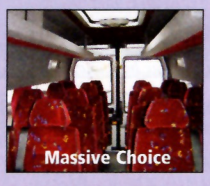

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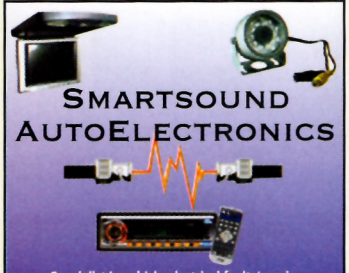

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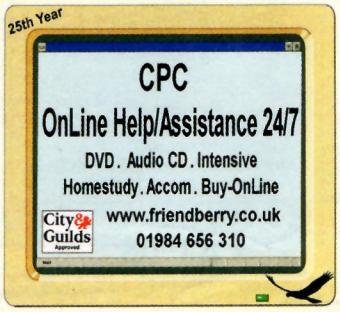

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Pegasus is Surrey County Council's new multi-million pound project to provide high quality and secure home-to-school transport to around 14 primary schools in the Guildford area. Expected to launch in January 2006, there will eventually be 22 brand new Low Floor buses available for school services and for other public transport opportunities to serve the local community. The vehicles and all staff will be based at existing premises in Guildford and run on our behalf by a bus operator partner, who will work closely with our own staff to get things up and running and then manage the services on a day to day basis.

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You will be educated to degree level or equivalent with at least five years' experience in the road passenger transport field and be a strong team player, with demonstrable past success in the management of complex projects. Excellent communication, organisational, analytical and time-management skills will be needed. CRB vetting will be a requisite.

pegasus senior transport officer

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You will assist the Project Manager with the implementation and subsequent day to day management of Pegasus, in conjunction with the operating contractor. Initially, you will be heavily involved in promoting the home to school services to parents and schools, establishing a customer database and constructing a network of cost-effective routes. Later, you will undertake revenue collection/accounting, issue passes, contractor performance monitoring and generally assist with business development and other Client functions.

You will be educated to A level standard or equivalent and have at least three years' experience in the passenger transport field, ideally with a Local Authority or bus operator. You must be customer-focused and be able to solve problems in an effective and people-friendly way, and be able to make and own certain decisions. CRB vetting will be a requisite.

For an informal discussion please contact Laurie James on 020 8541 8633, e-mail: laurie.james@surreycc.gov.uk

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Closing date for both posts: 8 July 2005. Interview date: 18 July 2005.

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Glover joins key law firm

DAVID Glover (above) has joined law firm Backhouse Jones, which specialises in transport.

An experienced transport lawyer, he joins the company's regulatory compliance and licensing team. As an advocate, he has extensive experience of appearing before Traffic Commissioners at Public Inquiry.

Pilkington joins LOOK

LOOK CCTV has appointed Tony Pilkington as UK Service Manager.

Before he joined Poulton-le-Fylde based LOOK CCTV, Tony Pilkington spent almost 10 years at TransBus as both a senior quality and design engineer.

He will be responsible for co-ordinating LOOK engineers working on CCTV installations as well as the company's team of service and maintenance engineers.

LOOK CCTV Operations Director Andrew Prince told routeONE: "Tony's appointment will allow us to introduce new service and maintenance processes designed to identify trends earlier and allow us to fix problems quicker."

LOOK CCTV, the UK's leading supplier of systems for coaches and buses, employs 38 staff and has installed more than 10,000 CCTV systems in the PSV market over the last 10 years.

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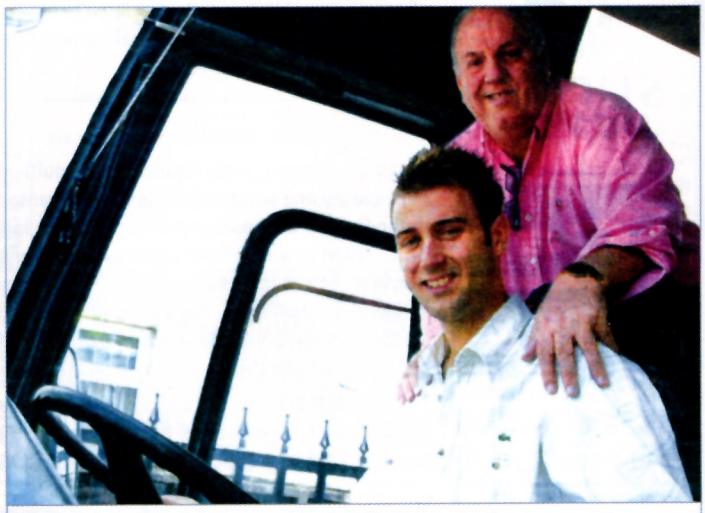
At 20 – Nick Brown is youngest driver this year



Nick Brown, 20, with proud father and coach firm owner Dan

NICK Brown, 20, has become the youngest person to pass their PCV test this year, according to the DVLA.

The son of Dan Brown, who since 1974 has run the well-known London firm Dan's Luxury Travel, was able to pass his test after just a week's training because of experience he had already gained at the business.

Nick Brown, who takes his place amongst the South Woodford company's 64 drivers, has already driven services to his old school and is now looking forward to fulfilling his ambition of driving trips abroad.

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Long service awards for Wilts & Dorset

The 27 recipients of Wilts & Dorset's long service awards

WILTS & Dorset celebrated a total of 900 years service by 27 members of staff at a long service awards dinner held at the Marsham Court Hotel in Bournemouth.

Wilts & Dorset Managing Director Alex Carter, was joined by Go-Ahead Chief Executive Chris Moyes. Go-Ahead has operated the company since August 2003.

To qualify for a long service award, the recipients must have completed at least 25 years. The longest serving members of staff with 40 years service were drivers Pat Perry based at Porton, and Robert Clarke at Poole.

Alex Carter thanked and congratulated the award winners for their dedication and hard work over the years that have contributed to the success of the company, that operates a timetable covering 35,500 miles each day with over 5,000 scheduled journeys on 152 services.

"We and the people who depend on a reliable public transport network appreciate the professionalism and conscientious service that we cannot take for granted," said Alex Carter.

Since the Go-Ahead Group acquired Wilts & Dorset, expansion of the company has created jobs for an additional 90 drivers and administrative staff.

Richardson becomes Ops Superintendent

TOP Line Travel of York has appointed Tom Richardson as Operations Superintendent.

Mr Richardson, 45, who joined the company five years ago as a driver, has been a supervisor since 2002 and now leads a team of 16 full time and 30 part time staff. Managing Director Peter Dew said: "Tom is well respected by passengers and staff alike and his support has been invaluable. He thoroughly deserves this promotion."

He comes from Edinburgh, and, when working on City Tour buses, delights in telling Scottish visitors about an ancient by-law which allows residents of York to shoot a Scotsman on sight!

Tom Richardson introduces driver Joanne Morris on her first day with the company

nextweek

routeONE issue 84

30 June 2005

ON TOUR re-timed

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routeONE ON TOUR, the magazine that takes coach tourism seriously, is distributed free of charge to all coach tour operators registered to receive routeONE. For more information call 07793 440282.

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